風の聖痕（スティグマ）5
―緋色の誓約―

「奴はもはや、神凪にとって有害な存在となっている。――討たねばならん」

八神和麻の父・厳馬の言葉に、綾乃はびくりっと身を震わせた。

過去の記憶に追いつめられた和麻が、暴走を始めたのである。

魔術師ヴェルンハルトに、能力を与えられた若者たちが再び戦いを始めた。魔術師の情報を得るため、その若者たちを次々と狩っていく和麻。狩られた者は、廃人となり果てていく。

和麻の壊れようがにわかに信じられない綾乃だったが、最愛の弟・煉の声も届かない和麻を見た瞬間、彼女の中で何かが音を立てて崩れた。

美しい紅炎を纏わせ、神凪綾乃はついに和麻の前に立ちふさがる。炎術師VS風術師、戦いの行方は？　愛と勇気のエレメント・アクション第5弾!!

風の聖痕（スティグマ）5
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山門敬弘

富士見ファンタジア文庫

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風の聖痕（スティグマ） 5

―緋色の誓約―

死神が、冷めた眼差しで見下ろしていた。
『死』そのものを具現化したような虚無的な瞳が、
意識をとらえて放さない――。

炎雷覇からたなびく黄金の炎が
完全な円を成した瞬間、
炎の円が結界と化したかのように、
和麻の風を焼き尽くした。

神凪 煉
REN KANNAGI
和麻の弟。中学生ながらすでに〈黄金の神炎〉を使う炎術師。〈弟属性〉はバリバリだが、しっかり者の12歳
神凪綾乃
AYANO KANNAGI
炎術師の一族・神凪家宗主の娘で、和麻の再従姉妹。現役高校生ながら次期宗主で、宝剣〈炎雷覇〉の現所有者である。16歳
登場人物紹介
ヴェルンハルト
WERNHARD
魔術結社〈アルマゲスト〉の幹部である魔術師。ラピスのご主人様である
八神和麻
KAZUMA YAGAMI
一見いい加減に見えるが、世界最強の風術師。風の精霊王と契約をした世界唯一の契約者〈コントラクター〉である。本名神凪和麻。22歳
ラピス
LAPIS
和麻の恋人・翠鈴にそっくりな容姿を持つ謎の少女。その姿には似つかわしくない水晶の大剣を自在に操る。

Chapter 1 - Signs of rematch
Part 1

"Shit"

Together with the spat out swear word, the sound of a weak fist striking the wall pointlessly reverberated.

This is an underground place below the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department. It wasn't generally used, a police cell used for accommodating unique criminals.

Clean and simple, in that space resembling a hotel single room the boy grieved over his circumstance.

"Why did something like that happen....."

He was supposed to have obtained power.

An invincible power.

A power that can grant all wished.

An invincible power.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this....."

He suddenly rose in the world.

A *higher* existence than those worthless masses whose existence doesn't matter.

From here on he would be the one to look down on those who looked down on him, scorn them, and like an overwhelming man of courage -

That was how it was supposed to be.

And yet, right now, he had been clumsily caught by the police. The power he thought invincible was sealed easily, and tomorrow they will apply treatment in order to get rid of it for good.

Again, he turned to nothing but an incompetent person. And in addition to that, he will be held in police custody even for his previous offenses.

He was disgraced. He was unbearably disgraced.

One girl's picture floated in his brain. The ringleader who forced him into such circumstance. The one who didn't listen his command, the command of a superior person, the disrespectful bitch who of all things, turned on him with savage weapons.

"Nanase....."

The boy - Utsumi Kousuke, squeezed out the girl's name, including as much curse in it as possible.

But, the anti-magic barrier installed in the police cell nullified every kind of power generated inside.

Utsumi's grudge, didn't attain form, fruitlessly melting in the atmosphere and disappearing.

".....shit....."

Reminded again that *the invincible power* had been sealed, Utsumi's body shook with rage.

"Shit! Shit! Shit! Come out! Come out! I am the chosen one! I'm not supposed to be here!!"

He knocked the door as if going mad. When the privileges bestowed onto him were taken, that absurdity destroyed his mental balance.

"Why? Why do I have to suffer through this? What do you accuse me of?"

But, no one was there to reply to his egotistic claim and Utsumi's random screams, drifting inside the room, were sucked into the walls and disappeared.

After a turn, a silence similar to frozen time filled the room. The reverberation of noise reverted the vector of his spirit visibly changing Utsumi's character, pressing his forehead to the wall, he cowered. A frail murmur escaped him.

"What to do....."

If it continues like this and his power will be stolen what will happen - even his dumb brain could easily picture it.

"They'll take revenge on me....."

Even if they won't charge him for his crimes, the people he cursed will definitely not forgive him. The retribution will be more severe than whatever he experienced until now.

And, right now he had no means of defending himself.

"No.....I don't want that....."

While moaning at the wits' end, Utsumi naturally regretted his behavior.

"It would have been better not to do that", or something

But that was not a remorseful contemplation. They were only the previous selfish thoughts fearing revenge, without a particle of Utsumi's compassion.

"It's not my fault.....I'm not to blame....."

Racking his brain, he tried justifying himself. He wasn't in the wrong. He's not the one responsible. Because, because -

"But, I only used it, right? The one who's evil and pushed this unwanted power onto me is that Pandemonium's Vesalius, right? I'm just like a victim tricked by that man, right?"

Deriving a satisfactory answer, Utsumi's eyes sparkled.

"First of all, if the police had time to catch someone like me, shouldn't they search for Vesalius first? The police is always like this. They don't get involved with the really bad guys but only arrest underlings, worrying only about settling cases by framing victims like me. Do you think the country's peace can be protected like that?"

With persistently self centered words, at the time he was talking on and on loudly.

" - Hm?"

On one point on the pure white wall, suddenly, a deep crimson spot appeared. A small dot, red like fresh blood. It grew as if being guided by an invisible pen and engraved letters on the wall.

These were the contents:

Congratulations!!

Congratulations for your level up!

In accordance with this level up, it's possible to class change and obtain even more power. If you wish so, a door reaching Pandemonium will open for you here, ushering you in.

Do you desire a class change?

Yes/No

"Wh- what.....?"

At the sudden variation, Utsumi opened his eyes wide in blank amazement. But at the same time, he instantly understood the meaning of this message.

This was a **mail** from Pandemonium.

One Pandemonium sent every time one acquires experience points, an information email. The sentences written don the wall had the same literary style like the several tens he received before.

But - Utsumi racked his brain puzzled.

"Level up?"

The way of obtaining XP is not just defeating one's enemy or in Utsumi's case fulfilling curses. Utilizing the power granted by Pandemonium, you're adding experience one by one.

Of course, when comparing it with killing one's enemy, the quantity is infinitly smaller.

Utsumi's recent results, is the amount he used on Nanase and his classmates. With just that it would have been impossible to level up, supposedly.

"Wait - that doesn't matter"

With more discernment than ever, Utsumi grasped the current situation.

It doesn't mater if it's a mistake or something. If he can level up and then class change, there's no reason to hesitate.

And then -

'If you wish so, a door reaching Pandemonium will open for you here, ushering you in'

The message was very easily delivered to the room equipped with an anti-magical barrier. That existence itself is sufficient evidence for the contents of the message.

Clearly, it's impossible for this barrier to resist the mighty power of Pandemonium. In other words, if he wishes so, he can really go to Pandemonium. He can escape prison.

"....."

Gulping down his saliva, Utsumi stared at the **mail** from Pandemonium.

Freedom. Even more power. It was an excessively sweet temptation. He can take back all he believed lost. He could obtain even more.

The woman who ridiculed him, this time.....

With an uncertain manner of walking, Utsumi walked to the wall the message was written down on.

The blood red letters. The half dried ink pulled down by gravity smudged the wall giving an ominous impression of an evil spell.

But even so, for Utsumi right now it was similar to a sacred oracle.

That *reality* that protected him revived his lost willpower.

"Like I thought, I am **special**"

Broadly grinning, his ugly lips warped, Utsumi laughed. An arrogant smile scorning everything beside himself.

"Just wait, Nanase. This time I'll get even with you!"

With a loud shout, Utsumi **clicked** on the **Yes** end of the message.

Part 2

Opening the door of her beloved GT-R car, Kirika looked at the cloudless sky.

The sun was shining brilliantly, burning distinct shadows on the earth.

The wind was fluttering refreshing, the birds singing a pleasant tune -

There was no trouble in the world - contrary to those words appropriate for the morning scenery, on Kirika's beautiful face there was a haggard look impossible to conceal.

The black circles below her eyes clearly indicated the extent of her fatigue. The cleaning up of the troubles that happened one after another last night was so difficult that even Kirika thought half seriously of skipping out.

Getting out of the car, she faced the entrance as if limping. An employee was already there, waiting for her arrival.

"This way - "

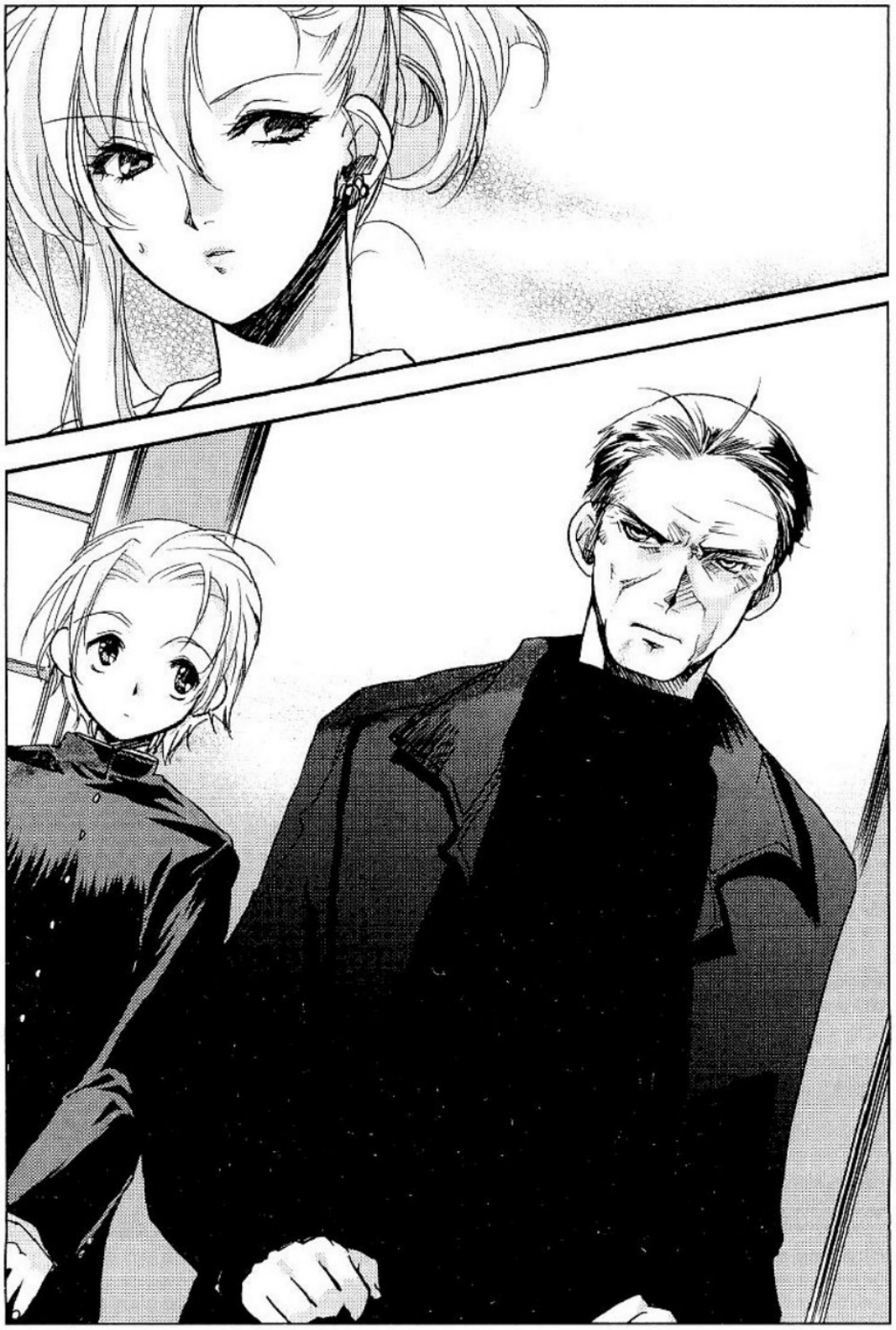
Following after the servant who informed laconically, Kirika entered the residence. She walked and walked and walked the exclusively long corridor. She stopped.

It seems they arrived at the place of destination. The servant knelt in front of the futsuma and announced Kirika's arrival.

"Please"

".....yes"

Although showing a slight hesitation, Kirika stepped forward on the other side of the futsuma the servant opened. The members inside were generally as Kirika expected.



Except for one.

"Genma-dono ——□"

Involuntarily Kirika called out the name of that person.

Kannagi Genma. The father of both Kazuma and Ren and the most powerful active Jutsushi of the family. Although the Suzerain - Juugo was the best, that ability that overwhelms Ayano yielding Enraiha reached the limits of myth, crossing over legend.

"That person, why - "

Glancing at Kirika stiff with fright, Genma informed in a low voice.

"Yesterday my son received favor from you."

"Your son - ?"

At Kirika's instant reply, Genma looked at Ren sitting next to him.

"Both."

"…….No, it wasn't that much……."

Bewildered by the interaction, Kirika became evasive using a ambiguous tone. But from the start it seemed Genma didn't cared about Kirika's answer.

"Really, I thought he grew up a little but his spoiled nature doesn't change……..perhaps he was careless with his job, being too busy with women."

"……..unexpectedly, a person who likes to complain?"

Using a downcast look in front of the grumbling Genma, Kirika attempted a rebuttal while observing the surroundings on her field of vision.

"I don't think he was particularly careless with his job."

"It's the same thing if your acts don't yield fruit.", Genma declared harshly.

But immediately following he asked without changing his tone.

"So, did you get in touch with Kazuma?"

" - Wha - ?"

With round eyes Kirika stared at Genma.

Why is Genma here. And why he spoke as if showing contempt towards Kazuma, she finally understood.

Averting her gaze in a casual manner, she examined the surroundings. Ayano and Ren didn't notice and only Juugo seemed to have reached the same conclusion. As if resisting a smile, the corners of his lips twitched.

"He - he's an unexpectedly indulgent papa, huh?"

While guessing she made the same expression as Juugo, Kirika desperately feigned calmness. She answered shortly, with brevity.

"No. Not really. No."

"I see."

The one who spoke wasn't Genma but Juugo, silent until now. Unseen by Genma, for one moment, he smiled to Kirika like an accomplice and then continued.

"Well, he's not the kind of man who will die when being swallowed by a crumbling building."

"I agree."

Saying it out loud it seemed as a cruel expression but Kirika agreed from the bottom of her heart.

There was no reason for doubt. To begin with, Kazuma was the one who rescued the three of them from the crumbling building.

He was loosing himself in anger but apparently one composed portion still remained.

Just before they were crushed by the downpour of debris, Kazuma spread a wind barrier and set the trio free.

Perfectly controlling the barrier until they landed, he delivered them on the above ground without any scratch. Especially smart, he raised an optical camouflage to remain invisible, denoting perfect composure.

About the safety of Kazuma's own body, Kirika didn't have any kind of apprehension. Rather, right now her body was in much more danger.

But the pure boy thinking of his older brother, seemed to be worried still. Frowning with worry, Ren said.

"But even for Onii-sama something unlikely can happen. Besides if he's fine he would have called at least."

"He doesn't want to be looked after right now. Or he doesn't want us to get in the way."

"What do you mean?"

Finding fault with Kirika's words, Ayano retorted sharply. Kirika's eyebrows frowned instantly cursing her verbal slip and tried to dodge the question with a forced smile.

"Don't worry about it."

"I am worrying about it!"

Understanding she couldn't deceive her, Kirika looked at Ayano with a pensive expression.

"Listen to me, Ayano-chan."

"What?"

"If you knew one of Kazuma's secret, one he doesn't want other people knowing, would you tell?"

"....."

As expected, she blocked it. Even Ayano, who she recognized was daring beyond recklessness, hesitated making Kazuma truly angry.

At that chance, Kirika smoothly turned the conversation around.

"That's why, don't ask today. It's not something that has a direct impact on us anyway - beside I'm sure you'll know soon enough."

" -□"

Ayano didn't seem to consent yet but Kirika completely ignored it.

"So, let's get down to business."

Speaking so, she took out a videotape from her bag. Looking inside the room and discovering a video deck close to the wall, she silently asked Juugo for permission.

Juugo nodded in silence.

"First, please look at this."

Together with Kirika's words, the shape of Tokyo's Government Office appeared on the screen.

The tallest in Shinjuku but more than that the characteristic twin towers. That gallant figure that already disappeared from reality and only existed in memories or records.

"If it's about the collapse, we already saw it on the news."

"Just look."

Rejecting Ayano's complaint without even turning around, Kirika gazed at the screen. Reluctantly, Ayano imitated her.

What was reflected on the screen was the first central government office. For a while nothing happened. But suddenly an unusual phenomenon appeared.

From the space between the two raised towers, a pillar of light soared facing the sky.

The film played over and over after last night's news would have scared everyone if seen for the first time. There was nothing to be surprised about now, though.

Ayano looked at the video with an indifferent expression. The pillar of light striking the heavens. It was the work of that girl called Lapis.

The goddess-like gigantic phantom clutching the phantom sword.

From the outside only a part of the sword was visible but that shape couldn't be mistaken. That more than sharp double edged sword, if that aberrant length were excluded, only Lapis hold the crystal weapon remained.

" - huh?"

Ayano remembered a slightly uncomfortable feeling.

When she saw the news did the pillar of light resembled a sword so clearly or did it looked like a stick.

Although bewildered, the video went on.

The pillar of light inclined.

The phantom sword was swung downward.

And then, as it tore the barrier, Pandemonium appeared.

" - Oh?"

At the same time it appeared, the huge blade swung downward beheaded Pandemonium. The rooftop tore, the walls were cut and although Pandemonium was split in two halves, the blade had yet to stop.

Really stretching close to two hundred meters, its tip moved until it faced directly below. The walls of the Tokyo Government Office were shredded in a vertical straight line like a joke.

Of course, the damage didn't stop at the outer layer of walls. The blade of that gigantic sword was pretty much perfectly buried in the building, only its tip protruding from the other side of the wall over-enthusiastically.

If they were to regard the architectural structure like a human body, this blow clearly cut through the marrow. Needless to say, it would be a fatal wound.

Although practically split in half, the building tried to maintain its balance by propping up the towers one against the other.

But the tall building reaching two hundred forty three meters couldn't bear the weight on half its body. As if flattened by a huge hand from right overhead it crumbled while raising a large quantity of dust.

The screen was covered by that dust. And then the video paused switching over to a sandstorm.

"This is the original footage."

Kirika stopped the video.

"What circulates on the news was altered to appear like a regular terrorism explosion. We thoroughly erased everything suspicious or changed it."

As expected, the fact that <<Tokyo Government Office was split in half by a long light saber and destroyed>> can't be allowed to spread on the Internet.

Ayano was completely supportive of that matter. But -

"So, what are your impressions?"

"The worst.....", murmured Ayano feebly.

It was clear that the destruction of the Government Office was caused by Pandemonium.

But she believed Lapis' attack was nothing but the start. That is, she only broke the balance and the building collapsed after, on its own.

No way half the building was removed in a single stroke.

"Are you trying to say we have to fight that monster?"

"I have high hopes for you, Ayano-chan.", Kirika carefully declared to the disheartened Ayano.

"It doesn't seem I can count on Kazuma for being that girl's opponent."

".....aah, so it seems."

Kazuma's expression when he met Lapis - Ayano couldn't imagine that man could be in turmoil to such a degree.

And then, the name he murmured - Tsoi Rin.

She didn't know who it was but undoubtedly she had a great significance for Kazuma. Enough to attack her without hesitation for the sake of protecting a girl who resembled her.

".....Whatever."

Shaking off that memory that made her uncomfortable, Ayano asked:

"So, what are we going to do from now on? As Pandemonium is destroyed for the time being we must think how to search for them, right?"

"Aah - about that....."

Averting her eyes somewhat uncomfortable, Kirika showed a bitter smile.

"Pandemonium still exists."

" - Eeh? Aah, on the Internet, you mean?"

"No, not just that - also in reality."

"....."

Including an incomplete understanding, Ayano stared at Kirika with half opened eyes.

No matter how she thought about it, Kirika's attitude was suspicious.

How did she obtain evidence of it in just one night? Why did she have such a shitty attitude, far from being proud for such a great accomplishment?

"What is this?"

Raising her voice, Ayano cross-examined Kirika.

"I want you to tell me everything you know. This is not the place to hide your hand, right? If you keep secrets I don't care if Tokyo Tower goes next."

"Aah - yeah - "

Kirika fleetingly looked at Ayano with upturned eyes and broke the eyes with a roundabout expression.

"Can you listen calmly, without getting angry?"

"Just say it already!"

As Ayano urged, raising her voice, Kirika began talking nervously.

"You see, last night Utsumi Kousuke escaped from his cell."

The moment she heard those words, Ayano completely ignored Kirika's request.

That is, she got angry.

"You incompetent! And you're still calling yourself a professional!?"

"That's why I said to calm down and - "

"Do you think I can calm down!?", shouted Ayano without listening to Kirika's restraint.

"What the heck were you doing? Didn't you said to leave it to you!?"

"N- No, listen - "

"You idiot! Why do you make it so difficult so late in the game !?"

"Leave it at that."

This time, Juugo forced his way through.

Because he pitied the condemned Kirika or maybe because he became irritated by the conversation's lack of progress, that heavy, vibrant voice controlled the scene with an authority no one could oppose.

Struck by the rebuke of the father she loved and respected, Ayano immediately regained her composure. While instantly realizing this was not the place to shout pointlessly.

The person that released Utsumi would aim at the foremost is -

"Nanase - did she already begin the lessons?"

"It's all right. Nanase-san is fine."

As if soothing Ayano who took out her telephone in a hurry, Kirika informed her with a composed voice.

With a totally disbelieving gaze and tone, Ayano asked:

"How do you know?"

"Even we are not that incompetent. Because we noticed Utsumi's disappearance immediately after, we appointed protection to Nanase-san. At present there's no abnormality. She went to school without incident. I received a call approximately thirty minutes ago. Are you worried?"

"....."

But even so, Ayano didn't change her distrustful attitude.

"I understood the *at present* part. But after all, you weren't able to restrain Utsumi, no? How will that escort be helpful when she is practically attacked?"

Including a bitter smile, Kirika agreed.

"Please give us that much credit. The Jutsushi from Special Investigation Unit are not weak enough to lose to an amateur. Because even if Utsumi escaped, that wasn't his doing."

" - ? Did someone guide him?"

Replacing the answer, Kirika took out one photograph. Innocently picking it up, Ayano quickly caught her breath.

"This....."

It was the photograph of a white wall. A plain white wall. And then, painted on the surface of it, sickening red letters.

Sent to Utsumi's cell, a *mail* from Pandemonium.

"What is it?"

In silence Ayano held out the picture to Juugo. Frowning unpleasantly, Juugo gave it to Genma. And he to Ren.

"On the wall of the room where Utsumi was held captive, this appeared unnoticed."

Confirming that the picture reached all, Kirika began speaking.

"It happened between eleven P.M. and midnight. Because the surveillance camera was stopped, the accurate moment of the act is uncertain."

"Eleven P.M....."

Tokyo Government Office was destroyed at eight P.M. Of course, at that time Pandemonium was supposed to be annihilated.

But the red letters etched on the cell's wall, the hand print that sealed the contract undermined that fact.

Below the hand written contract, the blurred, almost gone **Yes**. Perhaps Utsumi pressed it giving his agreement while it was only half dry.

"Incidentally the palm print of the contract matches Utsumi's."

Kirika backed up that guess with good timing. Ayano continued asking:

"The method of escape?"

"We don't know."

Kirika clearly shook her head.

"I said so before but the surveillance camera was interrupted and the guard put to sleep. We noticed something was wrong when they had to change shifts."

"What about clues?"

"Right. While there is no physical evidence, it doesn't seem like he just walked away."

"Space transfer?"

"A **door** was opened in the anti-magical barrier the detention cell was under, yes."

"Bullshit....."

At Kirika's words, casually shrugging her shoulders, Ayano was made to realize once again the enemy's lack of common sense.

"So, that's why, far from being destroyed, Pandemonium moves with increasing vigor. This is unconfirmed information but from last night to the early dawn of this morning four or five of those people with abilities underwent a class change in one stroke."

"Is that a lot?"

"Of course!"

Kirika responded at Ayano's words that held no sense of urgency as if she could barely endure her headache.

"It's not like we caught all of them but there's no mistake there are more than ten people who had a class change. If that number suddenly increases by five - "

"Hmmm."

Ayano made a thoroughly indifferent sound.

Whether their level goes up, whether they class change, those kind of people who obtained power by accident cannot possibly be considered her opponents.

"Maybe they plot raising all levels."

Kirika stared unpleasantly at Ayano who announced the serious deduction.

"You mean, the second stage ones who had one class change will become the norm and perhaps a third stage of chosen ones will start to appear?"

"Yes, but I cannot back it up."

"But, if they were to release so much power, won't they lose their human awareness?"

"What of it?"

Ayano cut through Kirika's objection with a brief comment.

The power given by Pandemonium is the power of a Youma parasitic to the human body.

To say it frankly it wasn't given per say.

In the process of absorbing and assimilating the possessing Youma, the time necessary to manipulate the Youma's power doesn't take more than an hour.

While their power grows, the Youma is eating into that person's soul. If they were to do another class change, it would be impossible to maintain a human heart for those people with such a weak will.

However -

"Who cares about such things?"

Those granted power, those seeking it, none will hesitate. They heartlessly didn't reflect on their former lives before the change so they won't consider the consequences after.

".....that may be so."

Reluctantly, Kirika agreed with Ayano's opinion. She didn't like it but it was very likely. Not a conjecture she could ignore.

"The question is what is the other party thinking?", continued Ayano dispassionate.

"Why are they doing such a thing? We don't know why they went so far as picking a fight with the police and rescued Utsumi."

Just by looking at the visible phenomena manipulated by the man calling himself Vesalius, it was clear he has a mighty ability.

But what he did in proportion with that power was childish or playful, something without a clear sense of purpose.

"That's the issue. Though at first I thought it was **Kodogu**."

Kodogu is one form of magic carried out using poisonous worms and such.

Cramming in a vase-like container a large quantity of poisonous worms and let then eat each other and then use the last remaining one as the core of a curse.

By making those with special abilities granted by Pandemonium fight each other, how will they use the last one standing, the most powerful among them - they pretty much agreed with that. But -

"You said *I thought*. Is that wrong?" asked Ayano, accurately judging Kirika's aim who used the past tense.

Kirika agreed mater-of-fact.

"Kazuma said so. He said The Youma possessing those children is all the same."

"All the same, you mean the same type?"

"No, the same Youma."

" - ?"

Not understanding that meaning Ayano tilted her head to the side in confusion.

Expecting that, Kirika continued the explanation without pause.

"Pandemonium is reducing Youma to digital data and letting them possess through the Internet. So Kazuma said that if a Youma can be turned to data, isn't it possible to make more copies of it?"

"....."

Ayano was silently petrified. If that was true, the number of enemies won't be limited. It means they can mass produce those annoying people with abilities without limit.

"B -But if it's like that, would the ability differ from one person to another?"

Pulling herself together Ayano pointed out what seemed at first an inconsistency in that theory. But the answer was quick.

"I think it was set up to match the aptitude of the people possessed. There's also the data volume issue, probably taking for the first time a seedbed related shape and sending them out like a seed or an egg."

" - I see."

"Well, you understand from my *I think* and *probably* that this is just a guess or maybe nothing more than speculation."

Contrary to her words her tone was full of confidence. The reason is but obvious.

"You mean that Kazuma reached the same conclusion so it's reliable intelligence. What's the problem?"

Even without saying so, Ayano had nothing to object. When it comes to the precision of their perception ability, Kazuma was ahead of her by a two digit number.

"Well, because of that the Kodoku theory doesn't stand."

".....It seems so."

The quintessence of Kodoku is the creation of a high density curse source by condensing multiple fragments of malice in one body.

Killing and absorbing oneself and turning what was whole into the very same thing, that's like returning to the origin. It won't develop into hatred.

"Then, after all, we don't know the enemy's objective?"

"Well, it's like that."

"He said it was an experiment."

A clear boy-soprano interrupted Kirika's careless answer. All eyes gathered on the new speaker.

"Ren, what did you...?"

"Like I said, it's an experiment. That man told me so. So, he can't stop it mid-way."

In a daze for a short while, Ayano suddenly clapped her hands as if remembering.

"Come to think of it, you met that masked bastard much earlier than us."

".....did you forget?"

Ignoring the amazed Kirika, daring such a retort, Ayano faced Ren.

"So, what's the experiment?"

"Eerr, he didn't say more."

"I see."

That's yet again, the same as not knowing anything. All the progress they made was that they had proof the incident was not yet over.

"Well, he didn't seem like a guy who would easily spill the beans - Aah, on that subject."

While complaining she looked at Ren as if finally realizing something. She asked the boy, looking slightly doubtful.

"Kazuma called that man *Bernhardt* but what does it mean?"

"Aah, that - "

After a brief contemplation, Ren spoke carefully.

"Vesalius was his alias or something and it seems his real name is Bernhardt Rhodes. He seemed to know Nii-sama - that man didn't clearly confirm it but he didn't deny it also."

"Bernhardt Rhodes you said - "

Ayano exchanged a dark glance with Kirika, using only one word to make sure.

"Him?"

"No, I'm not sure."

Ren shook his head without wanting to reply.

Bernhardt Rhodes - for those being a part of the magic society, the meaning that name held was exceedingly great.

There is a magic society called <<Almagest>>. Its activity is centered in Western Europe, a powerful organization praised as the highest authority in modern day magic.

Its name is derived from the astronomy work Ptolemaios published, Almagestum. Just like the name suggests it was at first a guild of astrologers.

But by collecting all kind of Jutsu and Jutsushi or the consequence of accepting the unprincipled ones, at present it developed to the point of being called the headquarters of Psychic Research.

The name of their leader was Erwin Leszal. Known as the personal pupil of the great magician Agrippa or as the Comte de Saint Germain, an enigmatic character that even in this circle was covered in insane legends.

More than being the leader for more than three hundred years he wasn't a public person and there were quite a few people who didn't believe in his existence.

It was the opinion of most that such a name was some kind of title the leader received for generations, the symbol of becoming the boss.

The management of such a substantial organization was carried out by the so called <<Council>> - the association of high rank Majutsushi.

And the Chairman of those Majutsushi was Bernhardt Rhodes.

To sum it up, Bernhardt was Majutsushi with so much fame no one would complain when calling him the world's best.

That celebrity seemed unlikely to go as far as concealing his face when he is doing criminal activities. But -

"A coincidence? I don't think so."

Ayano rejected the convenient explanation floating in her mind.

It can't be a coincidence. He was too good at deception. All that left is -

"I have no doubt."

The answer came from an unexpected direction. Everyone's gaze converged to Kirika.

Without faltering under those looks that felt like a physical pressure, Kirika continued.

"If he has a grudge against Kazuma, even more if he had something to do with that girl called Tsoi Rin, there's no mistake about it. The master of Pandemonium, Vesalius, is Bernhardt Rhodes of <<Almagest>>."

"Wh - wait."

"Well, if you think about it, there are no idiots who would dare impersonate Bernhardt Rhodes."

"True but more than that - "

Striking the table, Ayano interrupted Kirika's talking.

"Do you know that woman, Tsoi Rin?"

"Hhmm, sort of."

At that moment all sort of expression disappeared from Ayano's face.

Grabbing Kirika by the collar so she won't escape, she said in a subdued voice.

"Spill it."

"A - Ayano-chan, calm down?"

"I am calm, spill it.", repeated Ayano indifferent.

If she would have screamed there could have been a method to deal with her yet.

"Well, listen, I told you before right? When it comes to Kazuma's privacy, I can't really - "

Ayano was silent. But the force with which she grabbed Kirika didn't dwindle and clearly she didn't agree.

Kirika's eyes requested Juugo's help. The master of the mansion mostly silent so far looked at the two of them with an unreadable expression and spoke solemnly.

"Detective Tachibana."

"Y - yes?"

"Guessing from the conversation so far, it seems that the existence of this Tsoi Rin girl certainly holds a great significance within this incident. Although I praise your conviction of respecting someone's privacy, can't you overlook it and tell us?"

"Uuu....."

Kirika groaned. No way is the Head of the Kannagi Clan going to *ask* her. And then - she stole a glance at Ayano.

Clashing with that straightforward glance that seemed to never blink, she averted her eyes in a hurry.

Even when Juugo was speaking, this glance wasn't disconnected even for a second looking hard this way.

That steady look that said **If you don't speak I'll take you and eat you**, frankly, had no trace of being alive.

Searching for a ray of hope, she looked at the remaining two.

".....pfff."

Genma replied to Kirika's eyes, requesting salvation, with a tiny laugh. Come to think of it, it would be impossible for this man who showed he cared for the well-being of Kazuma not to take an interest in his past.

And then, Ren.

"....."

The moment he noticed Kirika's gaze, the boy looked away uncomfortably.

To sum it up, it seemed he found Kirika's distress unfortunate but didn't have the nerve to hold Ayano back.

Adding one thing to another, Ren himself seemed to have a special interest in the girl Tsoi Rin.

" - I give up."

Finally beaten down by the opponent's persistence, Kirika opened her mouth.

It was a helpless situation.

But most of all, the fact that the coercion given off by Ayano was reaching lethal levels made Kirika prepare herself for the worst.

"Just to tell you in advance, this is a hearsay story, I don't know how true it is."

With that introduction, she began speaking.

"It starts four years ago when Kazuma crossed over to Hong Kong running away from Kannagi and met a girl - "

Part 3

"...........ma.........zuma............."

What dragged him out from his pleasant slumber was an even more pleasant soprano call and the feeling of warm hands that tenderly shook his body.

He was instantly woken up but he pretended to be asleep, curling up underneath the blanket.

It was for the warmth of the bed he yearned for but much more so for the childish thought *I want her to look after me more*.

"Geez.....wake up.....already!....wake.....up.....!"

By the strength of her tone and the energy with which she shook his body she demanded him to get out of the bed. But, he covered himself in the blanket like a bag-worm and continued refusing to get up.

" - Uuuu, five more minutes....."

"Quit it already!"

Getting tired of those sloven words, she finaly took a firm step. She forcefully tore off the blanket and exposed his body, indulging in indolence to the cold morning air.

Now, he made his body even smaller. It was so pitiful it gave the impression of some kind of bug.

"Wake up, Kazuma! I won't feed you!"

Finally accepting it, he - Kannagi Kazuma stretched his curled up body. But, not waking up just yet, he buried his face in the pillow and groaned.

"I'm still sleepy....."

"I don't care. Oversleeping is no excuse for staying up late.", she declared point-blank.

"Change your clothes and get down in five minutes. If you don't make it in tine, you don't get to eat."

".....please forgive me."

With a backward glance at Kazuma, getting up sluggishly, she moved energetically and left through the door.

But, opening the door immediately after closing it, she peeked inside the room.

"Aah, I forgot."

" - what?"

Looking at Kazuma who turned around puzzled, she said:

"Good morning, Kazuma."

A full bloom smiling face first thing in the morning. Looking fondly at that radiance, Kazuma responded with a smile.

"Good morning, Tsoi Rin."

This is how Kazuma's mornings always started.

"Well then."

Standing up, he stretched once profoundly.

He didn't have time to waste. Tsoi Rin didn't lie. If he won't rush, he will really miss breakfast.

In addition to that, today he has a hard job to do. The contents of his stomach are a matter of life and death.

He must eat the breakfast made by Tsoi Rin and restore his energy in both mind and body -

"Uuryaa!"

Raising an exaggerated yell, he took off his pajamas. And then pulled out from the wardrobe the clothes for today.

"Hyo, cold -"

With a meaningless expression, at the time he put on his shirt, Kazuma looked at that thing placed above the dresser.

Adorned like an ornament, the cash card bent in two.

"....."

Contrasting with such a lively facial expression, etching a cynical smile on his lips, Kazuma bowed to a broken card.

"Good morning to you, mother. Thank you, today I am healthy also."

Looking at the card, his eyes cast a gloomy light. What they saw was the smiling face of the mother who threw him away -

"Waah, achoo!"

Kazuma let out a miserable shriek when the draft brushed his bare back. Of course, the gloomy, rough atmosphere collapsed immediately.

"Shit, you really don't have time for the serious stuff now. Just eat your breakfast and do your manual labor."

Changing clothes as fast as possible, Kazuma rushed out of the room. For the sake of filling himself with the home cooking of the girl he loved, much more valuable than his worthless past.

It's evening - just like Kazuma declared this morning, he was seriously working hard.

Inside a gloomy warehouse, resounding with gunshots.

"Why!? For Christ's sake!"

With a stupid appearance embracing with one hand a cat that seemed important, Kazuma abused his unreasonable fate that had something against him.

Of course, the situation won't get better just by doing that. Trying to find a chance to somehow run away he peeked from behind the container concealing his body. But -

Just then, continuous shots aimed at him.

"Wahh!"

Drawing back his face in a rush, he left that container like a cockroach. Soothing his violent heart, he took a deep breath, two, three -

"Shit, why is this happening to me!?"

But even so, unable to accept the present situation, he started complaining uselessly.

"When I'm finally free from that abnormal world with Majutsushi, with Youma, with evil spirits, this time is a gun battle!? What the fuck have I done?"

While complaining, Kazuma took out a knife from his breast pocket. Running up to the container soundlessly he jumped more than ten meters.

Faster than the man who noticed him and pointed his gun this way, he threw his knife.

"Guah!?"

Without changing its aim, the knife ran through the back of the man's right hand. The gun fell down from the hand that lost its power.

"Urya!"

With nothing more but the force of the jump, Kazuma landed on his feet on top of the man. Conspicuously, from under his feet the feel of the broken ribs was transmitted.

"Finally, it's settled."

Deciding on a pose on top of the man spitting out blood, Kazuma observed the man's face once more. Holding down with all his strength the cat fretting inside his arm, he said:

"So - who the heck is this guy?"

"Thank you for your efforts!"

Entering the shop, a man with an evil smile and a voice full of ridicule greeted Kazuma.

Kazuma grimaced, replying with a bitter voice.

".....As expected, you have sharp ears."

Ahead his line of sigh - inside the shop, one old man was sitting down.

The owner of the Tianshui Temple, an antique store standing side by side with the Kowloon's shopping district, Huang Ying Long.

But very few people knew that this person who apparently seemed like a good natured old man was as a matter of fact known for the most prominent information shop in Hong Kong.

But Kazuma was - unwillingly - one of those people.

To make matters worse, because he needed a job but couldn't show his face here and there his debt was one-sided piling up and he was already unable to act on an equal basis with him.

He explained his lack of honorific language as not knowing the language well enough but for Kazuma it was a minimal and childish opposition.

On the other side, ignoring Kazuma's infantile opposition, Huang continued grinning broadly.

"At any rate, you're very fond of conflict, huh? Why is it that just by trying to catch a run-away pet it results in a shoot-out? Do you yearn for to become a hard-boiled detective like in the novels?"

".....shut up.", spat out Kazuma unpleasantly.

"This time it wasn't my fault. I don't know who they confused me with but the other side started shooting all of a sudden. Besides, this is just the third time it turned into a fight. That's not enough to call me a trouble maker -"

"Hey, this is just the second week you work."

At the calm, precise retort Kazuma became silent.

By the way, Kazuma's current occupation is what's commonly referred to as a Jack of all trades. It also resembled pretty well a Japanese private detective.

Of course, he was only learning now but still bragging about the job itself.

- But now, that conceit was smashed into very small pieces.

"I'm leaving."

"Just wait."

Enjoyed from the bottom of his heart, Huang called after Kazuma who had simply turned around and started walking.

"We're past the time for jokes. I'll get straight to the point."

"Keep it short."

"Humph, then I'll finish with one sentence - Don't lose your head, brat."

In that instant, the atmosphere around Huang completely changed.

That cynical face that aged well turned to that of a long military service soldier living through Honk Kong's underground society.

"Wha.....what is going on, suddenly?"

"Is it fun tormenting small-time hoodlums?", asked Huang coldly of Kazuma who pretended to be tough although he was overpowered.

" Wha -"

"It must be fun. If your opponent is only a human being even you can display your might. But, do you think you can live a long life in this manner? You are not one of those *<<chosen people>>* after all."

Huang's words were hinting at knowing Kazuma's lineage and his past.

Exposed to the scars of the past he was averting his eyes from as much as possible, Kazuma was enraged.

"I know that!"

" - Really?"

Not hesitating in front of that gaze even mixed with killing intent, Huang asked again, matter-of-fact.

"You think this way, right? "Apart from being a Jutsushi, I am a superior person. If it's a battle without Majutsu, I am the strongest" or something."

"......tch!"

Accurately having been seen through the thought he entertained again and again, Kazuma sharply caught his breath. As for Huang, reading that response, he made a small snort not showing surprise.

".....what, are you trying to say?"

"I alredy did. It was *Don't lose your head, brat*. You're not a Jutsushi, you're not a soldier, you are nothing but a brat whose strong point is being good at fighting. Don't you ever try to look cool in front of someone holding a gun. For me it doesn't matter but if you die Tsoi Rin will be sad."

Kazuma was caving in so much abuse but the moment he heard the last few words, he stood up straight.

His face pouting like a child turned to that of an adult - a man who becomes an adult.

"I know. I will at least protect Tsoi Rin."

"Ha, protect, you say? Fine words when you're the one who is one-sided protected."

But Huang lightly laughed even at those words full of determination.

"If not for that girl, you would be getting dead-drunk in self pity even now. No, you would have drunk away the money you received from your parents and turned into a beggar, huh?"

"Guuh -"

Having the time when he fell to the very bottom discussed, Kazuma got red in the face.

Even more, Huang thrust his finger at him with a snap.

"Listen brat, I don't have too much expectation from you. You are an ordinary person. No matter how you struggle, you won't become a hero. Throw away the hopes beyond your means, think only how to make Tsoi Rin happy and live with your feet on the ground."

".....I understand."

Although he was pouting with dissatisfaction, Kazuma agreed.

It wasn't a very lenient evaluation but it was the truth.

Because he didn't have the attributes of a hero, because he wasn't chosen, for this reason, he was here right now.

"If you understand that's fine. You can go now."

".....yeah."

As if driven away by Huang's cruel wave of hand, drudgingly Kazuma took the road home.

Opening the door, Kazuma was wrapped up in the warm atmosphere and miscellaneous clatter.

Inside the store all seats were already occupied and the festive uproar made by the lively people cured a day's worth of fatigue.

His sweetheart was in the center of it. Both her hands fully loaded with trays of alcohol and cookery, she quickly made her way through the crowd of people as if swimming, waiting on tables.

Presuming the cold wind the arrival of a customer, she turned around.

"Ji wei hu....."

Those words of warm reception were interrupted in the middle. The face that continued smiling changed to something even more cute and shining.

"Welcome home, Kazuma."

"I'm home, Tsoi Rin."

Kazuma also responded with a full face smile to his beloved lover. When he stepped up to her words of banter and whistles down-poured from the surroundings.

But all of them were warm, without any ill will. Everyone was blessing from the bottom of their heart the young pair of lovers.

"You were late, huh?"

"Hmm - Aah, just a little."

Frankly - Because he got caught up in the moment and jumped about too much, he ended up getting sermons so Kazuma was vaguely evasive.

And since he was already deceiving her and her hands were fully occupied Kazuma took the opportunity and embraced Tsoi Rin's body closely.

But, she was suddenly snatched from the side.

"Kyaah!?"

Embraced by a drunken person, Tsoi Rin let out a small shriek.

But then, this was an everyday occurrence, one she wouldn't even spill a drop of alcohol over from the glasses placed on the tray.

"Tsoi Rin □ dump that guy already, I will -"

His declaration not allowed until the end, Kazuma kicked the man's face. Less than a kick he just pushed him with the bottom of his shoe but even so the man fall flat, spouting a nose bleed.

"Hey, don't put your hands on someone's woman!"

Looking down on the senseless man, Kazuma raised his middle finger. But, immediately after, he receive a crushing blow to the back of his head and also feel to the ground.

"Geez, Kazuma! What are you doing to the customer!?"

Skillfully finishing serving the table, Tsoi Rin shouted with the empty trays raised overhead. From the way she held it, the blow wasn't with the back of the tray but with its edge.

"……but it's fine to be violent towards me?"

"It's fine, because it's Kazuma."

A reply without hesitation. At a loss for words, Kazuma and the man he just kicked and fell down looked at each other and exchanged a wry smile.

"Hey, stand up already. It's very busy so help me."

"Well, I just came home from work."

"So what? I'm working all day long. Don't tell me, you plan to drink without a care while looking at me working?"

"I am sorry. I'll help you immediately."

Having no confidence of winning the verbal war, Kazuma surrendered on the spot.

Hecklers flew out from everywhere at that appearance without a shred of dignity sadly facing the kitchen.

"Show her who's the man, Kazuma!"

"How noisy! You don't even have a woman to order you around!"

Both the jeering man and the retorting Kazuma laughed together from the bottom of their hearts.

For Kazuma this place was his second home but the first one who made his heart feel at ease.

That joy he received, he wouldn't exchange it for anything else.

"Throw away the hopes beyond your means and live with your feet on the ground."

He remembered Huang's cool-headed words.

He understood now. Huang too, was concerned about him. If not, why would he cordially come in contact with a Japanese wanderer?

Turning her head over her shoulder, while bending her head slightly to the side marveling, Tsoi Rin smiled at him tenderly.

Even the customers a bit flinty but good people overall, were watching over them with warmth.

It's fine.

Surrounded by genuine smiles, Kazuma was convinced from the bottom of his heart.

I don't need any kind of special power.

It doesn't matter that I wasn't chosen.

Ordinary. Commonplace. But very happy, with his feet on the ground.

"I can live here."

Chapter 2 - The mad Fujutsushi
Part 1

The dead of night - Without even a slight movement, Kazuma opened his eyes wide in silence.

A cynical remembrance of those magnificent, dream-like happy days.

He woke up because the happiness was too much. It was like being taught that he will never go back to those times, not even in the middle of dreaming.

"Ku.....Kuu ku ku..."

A hollow laughter escaped. As if sneering at his ugliness and the whole world.

As a result of losing everything, he obtained that which no matter how much he wished for evaded him.

That was a modest, commonplace happiness found everywhere.

There was a person who would smile at him, tell him *Good morning* when he woke up and *Good night* when it was the time to sleep - only that but those were irreplaceable days full of happiness.

Even the power he pursued like a mad-man disappeared like something from a dream.

Because he met a person who looked at him plainly, not at <<his own strength>> or <<himself with power>>.

If he could have protected that girl and the small world revolving around her, it would have been enough.

Even if he couldn't hunt Youmas, there was no need for self-abasement.

He really thought so, from the bottom of his heart.

Until the time that happy paradise crumbled away without leaving any trace.

"Really....."

Inside the darkness, Kazuma laughed at his foolishness.

How naive was he.

If you're weak, if you lose, you can't protect anything. It means losing everything.

Just like he deserved, he became alone again.

No - he's not alone.

There's him and he - those two.

Revenge is vain, it's a sterile act that doesn't give back anything, an intelligent person will proclaim so with a triumphant expression.

Kazuma generally agreed with it. When he pursued that man, during that time he lived only for revenge he never thought revenge was meaningful.

But there was nothing else left except for that. There was nothing else to do.

That's why, he desperately refined his ability. Throwing away anything else, all for the sake of killing one man. But -

"I made a mistake....."

Erasing his facial expression, just like a Noh mask, Kazuma murmured.

This is the result of thinking that dealing with that man was enough and neglecting his followers.

"If you find the answer, come again."

Those conceited parting words, won't go away. Words said from the view-point of the superior one that completely look down on him.

Kazuma groaned, tightly clenching his fists at that disgrace.

"*the answer*, you said? Isn't it obvious.....Kill you. Break that good-for-nothing doll - Aah, I'll do it. This time, for sure"

His mouth warped, the same daring smile as ever. But, if Ayano or Ren were to see his eyes, they would probably be at a loss for words.

Hatred and insanity and the pair of eyes swirling in evil malice boiling hot with deeply rooted delusions, changed that cynical but cheerful smile in a different thing altogether.

That smile, expressed by most of the enemies they killed until now, was mad.

Part 2

Late at night, there was a countless number of people surrounding the already closed public park.

Everyone was young. The eldest was maybe in the first half of his twenty. But, considering it was a gathering of young people a bizarre silence was floating around that place.

A heavy silence.

Even the noises made sometimes didn't had a following and vainly disappeared in the air.

It couldn't be concluded that they held their breath in fear of being seen trespassing on the park. They don't care about such ethical viewpoints. They don't have law-abiding intentions.

If they were accused, perhaps they would ask back with a straight face. What's wrong with creeping in a closed park? They're not troubling anyone, or something.

They weren't silent, they were accumulating. Preparing for the moment of explosion drawing near, silently raising the pressure. They had one mind.

And then, a few minutes later - the time came.

"It - it came....."

"It's coming....."

Together with the muffled commotion the crowd of people separated in halves, and one man stepped forward to the center of the plaza. After him, another one.

Facing each other at a distance of roughly five meters, the two men.

Looking at them, a buzz spread among the members of the audience and this time the volume was raising without a pause.

Someone stamped his feet.

'Dan....Don.....Don....'

Swiftly propagating in the surroundings, it was like a rumble in the ground, making the earth tremble.

'Dan! Dan! Dan! Dan! Dan! '

Excited cheering piercing the ears and earth tremor.

Those two men standing in the middle - didn't need explanation, the situation was very clear.

It's very improbable but assuming there was a man who arrived here by accident, he would be able to see through this event instantly.

That this is an arena. That for the sake of watching the two man at the center fight for their lives, so many spectators gathered and they were widely enthusiastic, beyond reason.

It wasn't unreasonable for the spectators to be so stimulated. The match tonight was the largest *big game* since **the game** started.

Among spectators there were many players like the two in the center.

For such people it was an aspiration but also a landmark - those belonging to the <<Second Class>>, the <<Seeds>> will for the first time fight each other tonight.

At a different level than those <<First Class>>, the spectators anxious to see the exchange of power beyond human understanding were raising their voices in joyous shouts similar to angry roars.

Contrastive with the members of the audience, the men standing still at the center, were silent.

Exchanged glances. Sneer versus scornful laughter.

On one side, a slender boy dressed in a school uniform, <<Shining>> Shin.

The other one, with a black leather jacket and black pants and metal accessories dangling here and there - <<Devil Master>> Kou.

At the time the spectators started flustering about the two continuing to stand off against each other, as if signalling the start of battle, Shin got the ball rolling.

"No way, you don't really think you can win this match right?"

Words that were polite at first but clearly had no problem looking down on the opponent.

That figure properly wearing a blue school uniform from a famous high school was perhaps suited with that tone.

"You're a demon-user. While you can summon powerful demons, you yourself have no power. You may be able to win against <<First Class>> small fry with only that but it won't work on the <<Second Class>>, the <<Seeds>>", Shin declared, together with a blatant sneer.

"I don't know how many <<Seeds>> there are - but I'm prepared to bet. That you are the weakest"

"Che, shut the fuck up", Kou swore, without showing any hint of being shaken by Shin's words.

"Don't be so conceited for a tumbler whose only redeeming feature is sparkling. A boy from an elite school shouldn't fight, how about you go home and study for a test, huh? With that power of yours you could lower[1] your electric bill so it's pretty convenient, huh? "

" - Those words will cost you greatly", announced Shin in a frozen voice, closing his eyes partly.

"I'll kick you down"

Kou raised his right hand middle finger. And then - the battle start.

"Coma out, Harpas!"

"You're slow!"

In front of Kou the space was warped. The summoned demon was an omen that appeared from the underworld, beyond our dimension. But, without waiting for it, Shin pushed out his right hand straight ahead.

"My ability is the fastest. And also, the strongest"

He had enough composure to say so, proudly.

That was by no means an exaggeration. At present, the fastest <<Skill>> confirmed until now was the <<Seed>> manipulating light, the <<Javelin>> fired by <<Shining>>

Its natural shape was light collected into a wave, in a word a laser beam. Except the way it was produced, it was a purely physical light.

It had no special magic effects but the overwhelming caloric value burned through everything with the speed of light, literally.

"Just die!"

The spear of light was fired together with the death sentence. Shin was convinced of victory. But -

"....."

He faintly frowned.

A resistance from the place he hit should have been impossible but he felt he missed his chance to kill.

As if supporting that, the distortion in space flickered without showing any sign the distortion ended. From inside there, the darkness of the underground peeked.

And then, two ominous red lights.

"Kuu!"

Although faltering, Shin fired the light once more. The ray glistening blue pierced at the center of the distorted place - and silently, it was repelled.

The light slipped off at a slightly different angle and grazed Shin's cheek.

"Wha - ?"

Shin's face was distorted with shock. Looking at it, showed a sneer full of superiority.

"Ku kuu, did you think I would appear in front of you without any counter-plan? It won't work, you know. Because your power can't even scratch me! "

"Ab - absurd....."

Opening his eyes wide in surprise, Shin stared at Kou.

The distortion in space before he realized. But not one demon was summoned -

"N - No.....that's...."

In front of Kou, a small bird was flying. With bright white feathers even in the dark. Crimson eyes.

"A pigeon? Are you saying a pigeon reflected my <<Javelin>>?"

The pure white small bird was flying playfully around Kou, describing a helix. And then stopped on his shoulder.

Those red eyes pierced through Shin.

" - tch!"

Faced with that sinister thing, Shin involuntarily gasped.

He understood at a glance. That this thing has no connection with its outward appearance.

Profound understanding no ordinary bird would posses, overwhelming hatred and an evil disposition, everything was clamoring inside those eyes.

"Did you contract the Devil King Harpas Solomon, the ruler of seventy two demons?"

Clearly showing a knowledge of summoning, Shin raised a cry of shock. But -

"King Solomon? Who the heck is that? "

"Huh? "

Shin's jaw fell.

"This guy is no devil king. it's the demon Harpas - holding the power to reflect magic, my trump card!"

"R- reflect magic !?"

Not remembering any sort of such description in *Lemegeton* or *The key of Solomon*, Shin stared at Harpas with astonishment.

"Huh, it's something an elite like you doesn't know! It's common sense, you understand, common sense! "

Kou was becoming increasingly elated. And then, he shouted loudly.

"I'm not finished yet! Come out, Fenrir! Flesberg!"

Responding to the summoning voice, new demons made an appearance. A huge wolf and an eagle.

Both their eyes filled with overwhelming energy, fixing their glares on the stand rock still Shin.

Of course, Harpas didn't disappear.

"Impossible....Can you operate three demons at the same time? ", groaned Shin with a shuddering voice.

It was understandable. More than sealing direct attacks, beginning attacking in waves from the ground and the sky - it was practically an iron wall battle formation.

Right now, there was no way for him to resist.

"You shit, you said earlier I was the weakest, huh? ", Kou said putting on airs of teasing him.

"Then, it means right now you are in the position of <<The Worst One>>. No, maybe outside the ranks, as if you were dead? "

"B- bastard....."

"Devour even his bones! Go, Fenrir! Flesberg!"

In response to the owner's command, the two beast stir.

Fenrir forcefully gallop on the ground, Flesberg flaps his wings in the night sky.

"D - Don't underestimate me!"

Aiming at the attacking demons, Shin fired rapidly <<Javelin>>. But, because of their very beast-like movements he, no more than a human man, wasn't able to reach them.

The light rays slipped through and danced like during a concert and the two beasts drew near fast like the wind.

"U - Uwaaaaaaaaaaaa"

Without shame or honor, Shin tumbled on the ground dodging the beast's attack.

The symbol of his excellence, the blue uniform was smeared in dust.

"Haa ha ha ha ha! Don't you look good, elite boy! Do your best and show me just how far can you run! "

Shin glared with eyes boiling with hatred at Kou, laughing loudly.

But, the spear of light doesn't reach the fagot.

For him right now there was no other option but wait for a chance to recover from this hopeless situation while running about like a hunted animal.

"Shit! Shit! Shit!! I'm - ***I'm -*** *"*

While this disgrace was burned into his consciousness, Shin continued running around in this ugly manner.

This could possibly the biggest disgrace of his life. Not, a close fight.

He was fighting one with the same rank. Although he verbally looked down on his opponent, he didn't believe he could win easily from the start.

But, this is different.

He's not fighting hard against the <<Devil Summoner>>. He's fighting hard against the demons the <<Devil Summoner>> is employing.

Even though they are the same, the difference is so big.

The ones fighting, the two beasts versus the <<Javelin>> itself. The <<Devil Summoner>> is only watching from a safe place.

He - the <<Javelin>> was right now left behind the <<Devil Summoner>>. Not the ups and lows of abilities.

For example, it was like the existence of the piece called <<Game Player>> itself was considered of lower rank.

He didn't allow it.

He was a chosen one. In comparison to those masses whose existence was optional, he was a superior being.

For someone like him to be considered the same rank as those enslaved beasts, to be looked down upon by such a vulgar man, it was something that shouldn't exist.

"If I only had more power"

He desired power. He was keenly craving it.

And believed in it. The fact that he still had a dormant power.

He believed so because he was a chosen man. Because it's impossible for him to loose to that scum.

That's why he ought to have a hidden power.

At that time, something pulsated inside his body. A pulse that seemed to make his heart explode and made his blood boil.

Simultaneously he strangely could see clearly the movements of the beasts that until now only seemed an afterimage.

Even their paths as of now, their position one moment in the future were decided with level of foresight that exceeded simple prediction.

His glittering yellow pupils lengthened vertically and captured all vectors.

Equally simple like shooting the targets in slow motion, no as if they stopped, Shin shot the huge beast jumping low.

"Ghyaaaa!"

Shot through the side, Fenrir raised a cry of pain. From its mouth with barred teeth, a large quantity of blood was vomited.

"Fe - Fenrir!"

" - Did I miss killing him, huh?"

Kou was panicking but Shin spoke in a contrastive cool tone.

He still couldn't use his body according to the future foresight. Conversely to the situation until now, Shin's reading exceeded Fenrir's movement but his aim was slightly off.

"R - retreat, Fenrir!"

With a suspicions discomposure, Kou made Fenrir retreat. The big wolf's image blurred and returned to the underworld with a wounded body.

The fact that Kou became confused and was panicking over Fenrir's wounds was only natural.

Summoning magic was a double edged sword. He was able to use the power of a mighty demon but the moment the demon died, his own body receives those damages.

Kou personally tested that with his own body.

"Kuu - Flesberg!"

Kou ordered the winged demon circling in the sky to attack.

Flesberg assailed Shin with an almost vertical attack. It was power drive (?).

Using the aid of gravity, its speed broke through the speed of sounds in the blink of an eye.

But for Shin's eyes, strangely changed, it looked like a caterpillar even at the speed of sound.

Brandishing Javelin in a mow down motion he burned half of Flesberg's right wing.

Flesberg suddenly lost momentum and crashed into the ground.

The huge bird that crashed down at a subsonic speed, and as compensation for crater it created on the ground it exploded and scattered in all directions without leaving any trace.

"Gaaaah!? "

The shriek of understanding of the familiars' death scream reach from a slightly far away place. Obviously it was the summons's master - Kou's scream.

"B - Bastard.....you bastard, how dare you"

"*The turning wind*, huh? it must be hard being a summon master...", said Shin blandly, staring coldly at Kou groaning in pain.

As he was knowledgeable in the occult, he obviously knew the dangers of it.

"What will you do, do you want to <<Give Up>>? If you get down to your knees and apologize for your rudeness until now, I may forgive you"

"F - Fuck off"

Although grasping his painful heart, Kou didn't lost his will to fight. Seizing his telephone with the other hand, he pushed it forward proudly.

"Don't believe you won after defeating only two. I stocked ten other demons inside this telephone. Seven still remain."

"That's good", replied Shin with no indication of disturbance.

"Then call the next one already. The <<Death>> of another seven - I'm very interested how long will you be able to endure that agony? "

Shin laughed, making those golden pupils shine bright in the dark night. From his lips turned up something as long as fangs and very sharp peeked.

" B - Bastard..."

Overawed by Shin, who seemed like a different person, Kou instinctively backed off.

"What's up with your eyes.....and those teeth, are they fangs?"

"Is there something wrong with my eyes? "

Shin slightly curved his lips, fixing his glasses.

"Something like that doesn't matter. What I am interested right now is your pain and you screams in the agony of death, only that. I think it's obvious - "

From his warped lips, white fangs showed. The quiet insanity dwelling in those golden pupils. The Kehai of a devilish, inhuman person -

"Don't worry, I won't let you die"

"Come out, Fafnir! Mushufushu! Raksasha! "

Together with the sentence full of joy, Kou called out his most powerful demons.

Realizing the battle reached its climax the spectators screamed from the bottom of their lungs and stamped their feet.

At that time - that man appeared.

Part 3

The cheers were interrupted, the commotion died out.

All sound vanished from the plaza.

The silence overflowed.

The spectators that moments before were wild with enthusiasm felt goose-flesh.

Frozen in place like all their hearts were caught in a tight hold, not one moved. No, they couldn't move.

The group of people that originally lost their reason don't have reason enough to recognize the change in atmosphere.

But even so, they noticed this.

As if at that moment the entire world became their enemy, from all direction an intimidating air was drawing near.

As if they had been swallowed in the belly of huge monster - most people had that kind of mental image.

That was true in a certain sense.

They had certainly been gulped down.

By the **domain** of the man who ruled the entire atmosphere covering this earth.

The air was sharply prickling the skin. It weighted on as if squashing them.

Their necks exposed to the Shinigami's sickle, almost all felt that freezing fear.

The crowd of people was divided. Just like the time the two were ushered into the ring.

But the decision was loaded with a different intention.

Everyone looked at that one man walking towards them holding their breath. No one tried to stop the impolite man becoming a hindrance for the battle at its climax. No one raised their voice. No one wanted to have anything to do with him.

Everyone realized. The origin of this presence full of death that altogether enshrouded the park, of the this sinister atmosphere was just this one man.

But - there were also people who didn't notice. For example those sky-rocketing tensions, in the middle of the battle.

"Aaaaaaaaah!? Y - you - !!"

Kou - known as <<Hell Hound>> before the <<Class Change>>, knew the face of the man that appeared.

When he perceived the man he hated, the one who made him taste his first defeat he shouted in a voice trembling with anger.

"At last your time has come, bastard! Aren't you together with the police dog?"

Looking around, he searched for the child-faced police officer that once defeated him. But, he wasn't anywhere.

"He hee"

Confirming that the man was alone, on Kou's face a broad, sadistic grin appeared.

The unfortunate part - was that he didn't know this man's - Yagami Kazuma's power.

It was very unfortunate.

"Showing your mug around here by yourself, so nonchalantly... I'll pay you hundred-fold for back then!"

Burning with resentment, Kou tried to spur his demons on Kazuma. But -

"Wait!"

The long beam shot together with the voice hindered Kou's revenge. Obviously, it was the <<Javelin>> shot by Shin.

" - huh!?"

Kou made Harpas receive that hit but Harpas's magic reflecting ability couldn't completely deflect the beam with increased output.

For a few seconds the light spear and Harpas' field struggled for supremacy but eventually it divided into parts and disappeared in the empty space.

"Wh - what are you doing?"

"You can't possibly ask me that. You're fighting against me right now. Don't confuse the order of things."

"Shut the fuck up! You're coming after. I need to hurry so this guy doesn't run!"

"That's not my problem"

With that cold reply, Shin turned his eyes on Kazuma.

"I didn't know what business you have but withdraw for a short while. If you become more of a nuisance I'll kill you"

"<<Shining>> and <<Devil Summoner>> - both of you are <<Second Class>> <<Seeds>>"

Kazuma didn't reply, ignoring those affected threatening words.

Having been ignored, Shin's veins popped out but ignoring even that, the man one-sided announced his business.

"Answer to me. Where is Pandemonium, the place you scum class changed."

"Che! There's no need to tell someone like you!"

Spitting out in a rough manner, Kou ordered the demons to attack.

"But, that's right, if you win against these guys maybe I will teach you -"

He didn't had time to finish his phrase. The moment he uttered those words the three demons were beheaded by frozen wind blades.

What's more, even Harpas, holding a magic reflective power, was divided in two.

"Gaaaaaahhh!"

Immediately before a scream that didn't seem human but beast-like roared. All eyes gathered there.

On the writhing and screaming <<Devil Master>> Kou.

Experiencing the <<Death>> of four demons at the same time, what he felt via his physical nerves what more than he could handle.

His body literally experiencing the an agony more painful than death, without even being able to faint all four of Kou's limbs were convulsing and from his mouth opened to the limit, he gushed out fresh blood and shrieks.

But, because he already the resistance of a similar experience or because he had some kind of counter measure, Kou didn't lose his awareness or sanity but continued to bear that suffering.

He was made to bear that suffering.

"Aah.....aah.....aah?"

Overhead Kou, lying down face up breathing roughly, a black shadow blocked the moonlight. Focusing his blurry eyes, he barely focused.

" - Hiii!"

He gasped involuntarily.

The Shinigami was looking down on him with a cold gaze.

"Aa.....aauaa....."

He wanted to run but his body was completely still. He cannot look away.

The embodiment of heath, that nihilistic pupil seized his conscience and won't let go.

"N - No....stop....."

Trying to go against something he'll never be able to go against, Kou finally became realized. That if he won't obey, he'll certainly be killed.

- Unfortunately, that was definitely a mistake.

With eyes full of supplication Kou looked up at the Shinigami - Kazuma. He desperately begged for his life.

"P - Please wait.....p-please, wait.....I don't know where Pandemonium is.....I really don't, please believe me....."

It was true. Certainly, at the time he made the class change he walked in the physical Pandemonium but he arrived there after walking aimlessly so he really didn't remember it. The same happened on the way back.

" - I thought so"

After a brief period of silence, Kazuma blandly assented without asking twice. In Kou's eyes the light of hope dwells.

"T - That's right! I'm sorry for making you come all this way for nothing. B - But I'll cooperate with you! I have friends who know things! So -"

"I don't think he would behave so stupidly that even shit like you would realize. But, at least a clue must have remained inside you"

Ignoring Kou's words, frantically flattering him, Kazuma took out a black glove. He wore it on left hand. Inside the very dim light, it seemed Kazuma's left hand disappeared.

If a person with a good judgement were to be present there, maybe it wound realize that the glove didn't reflect any light.

"Before your brains burn and break, do your best to remember"

Saying that, Kazuma's left hand completely stretched and was thrust before Kou's forehead.

And, with no hesitation, pushed in.

Without resistance, four fingers wrapped in the glove sunk inside the skull.

"GRNNNNNNGYOEEEEEEOOOOOOOO!!!"

From Kou's mouth that kind of sound came out.

Of course they weren't words. Even his voice was barely recognizable.

It was as if raw pain was turned into the vibration of the air. It was as though that dissonance could break the ears.

Even appraised as *an inhuman sound* was wrong as the shriek couldn't possibly originate from a living thing.

It was a sound that would remain forever in the eardrums and brains of the unlucky people who were present and revived every night during nightmares.

"....."

But without being the least perturbed in the least by Kou's disgraceful behavior, Kazuma calmly continued doing his work.

The fingers piercing the brain were moving carefully as if searching for something.

Each time his handling was making the feet and hands to nervously springing up, his fingers were reaching deeper.

" - Che"

Smacking his lips a little, Kazuma stood up. Simultaneously, the fingers that churn the brain were drawn out.

From his fingertips, some sort of fluid was dripping.

And yet, whether it was the glove's capability of Kazuma's power, on Kou's face not a trace remained.

But, that face opening its eyes wide and drooling and that body that was intermittently convulsing even now clearly demonstrated the abnormality produced in the man's body.

I'd rather die than become that - everyone thought so when looking at that sorry state, it was that sort of atrocity.

" - well then"

Defying the hellish, oppressive silence, Kazuma slowly turned around. In the line of his sight was -

"Will you also exercise your right to remain silent?", he asked in a quiet tone while gazing at <<Shining>> Shin.

With a start Shin's body trembled and stared at the juice dripping from Kazuma's left hand.

"Aah, this?"

With something that slightly resembled a bitter smile, Kazuma his left hand.

"It's all right. This won't damage your brain. It will only hurt a little"

The smile peeking around his mouth deeply grew. Together with a dark gloom and sadness.

"If you have a strong spirit, by the time I finish you'll only be mad"

" - !!!"

That heartless but also half hearted sentence, filled Shin's heart with horror.

His survival instinct was ordering retreat - no, capitulation.

He was no match for him. He absolutely cannot win. He won't be allowed to run.

There's no choice but to fall to his knees.

"Ridiculous, what are you thinking? The opponent is only a wind user!"

But the whisper of instinct was rejected by the voice of reason. Saying, he cannot be defeated by a wind user.

He was very intelligent so Shin overestimated intelligence and reason over instinct.

In comparison with baseless intuition, deriving answers from objective data and logical thinking was the sigh of a great man - that's what he was thinking.

It was obvious which is faster between wind and light et cetera. If fact he defeated two wind users until now.

"That's right. Loosing it's impossible"

Promptly removing his fear and becoming very confident instead. And then, that sadistic enjoyment.

Dreaming of Kazuma's silhouette writhing inside a pool of blood, Shin shivered with a dark delight.

"Ku ku - I'll sever his feet and hands and teach him his place while crawling like a worm"

His golden eyes sparked and his sharp, long fangs peeked from the beginning from his curved lips.

Even hough he expressed such an inhuman smile, Shin warned with plenty of composure.

"If you think I'm the same as that trash, you'll have a painful experience"

Kazuma was silent. Without showing any reaction, he stepped up with constant steps.

"Fuu, how foolish"

Murmuring in an affected tone, Shin pushed out his right hand. The surging out <<Javelin>>

The flash exceeding the speed of light not to mention seeing all, he won't give him even the time to notice the attack.

What happened to him, he will die even before understanding it - that is the fate of one opposing <<Javelin>>.

This is the end.

" - huh!?"

Shin's eyes opened wide in shock. In spite of firing a certain kill hit Kazuma was still standing.

That head that was supposed to evaporate was unscratched, not even his walking pace changed.

" - You undid it?"

Frowning his brows he pointed his right hand forward again.

Deciding on aiming at the center of his face, he fired.

The blue light glittered in the night air and split in two before Kazuma's eyes.

The beam divided into parts faded on Kazuma's both sides and vainly disappeared in the air.

"Wha - ?"

In front of the lack of common sense spectacle, Shin became rigid. But, a moment after.

But in order to hit Kazuma, approaching as if nothing happened, he rapid-fired <<Javelin>> without taking aim.

All of it burst open and disappeared in front of Kazuma.

"S - slicing light using wind.....?"

If he were to explain the spectacle generated in front of him, that's the only explanation he could think of.

Everything else was impossible. But, even so -

"D - don't screw around -"

Letting anger take its course, Shin shouted.

"It's impossible to cut light using wind! Besides, are you bastard trying to say you can see an attack at the speed of light?"

Those were some irrational words but to be expected from his, from their common sense.

A qualified person that could manipulate the flow of air, a <<Wind User>> whose ability was granted by Pandemonium couldn't possibly slice light.

But Kazuma was Fujutsushi - A Jutsushi who could concretely express his will and change the world via the Wind Spirits.

Although it seemed the same on the outside its true nature had a totally different dimension.

For Kazuma's wind charged with thoughts of decapitation, there's nothing it can't cut.

Even if it were to run at the speed of light it's unthinkable not to be able to cut only a laser-beam.

"Sh - Shit!"

Without learning his lesson, Shin fired <<Javelin>>. But, faster than light Kazuma's wind was of course quicker than even the technique's activation.

Shin's right arm pushed forward was silently severed from the joint.

The <<Javelin>> fired while the arm was mid-way falling fired below and made a round hole in the ground.

".....eh?"

Shin looked down at the arm tumbling down on top of the the grass with a blank expression. That gaze gradually got up and stopped nearby his right shoulder.

Immediately, as if matching his timing, fresh blood gushed out from the wound.

"Uwaaaaaaaaaaahh!!"

Screaming in panic, he held down the wound, the joint of his amputated right arm with his left hand. Obviously, the hemorrhage didn't stop just because of that, fresh blood pouring from the gaps between his fingers.

That right side of his blue uniform only was dyed red.

"Uooo, Uaaaaa, Aaaaaaaaaaaaah!! "

Shin continued to scream.

In silence Kazuma took the last step and casually tripped up Shin. He trampled down on it, lying face down. On the body with just one arm.

Whether it was by purpose or by accident, with just that one move of stepping on his back, Kazuma perfectly blocked all of Shin's resistance.

"....."

The screams stopped. The pain and shock were surpassed by the absolute fear.

Twisting his neck as much as possible, Shin looked up at Kazuma.

"W - Wait! Wait, please wait!"

With tears overflowing his wide eyes, Shin desperately begged for forgiveness.

"I'll speak! I'll tell you everything! So, so please -"

But the fierce chills that he felt in his head interrupted his heartbreaking petition. As if taking a roundabout path because the back of his head was getting in the way, fingertips were approaching his forehead.

Slipping inside his head and mind, the fingertips of destruction that stole everything.

"N - No.....No -"

The feel of fingers forcing their way through flash, bone and brains.

That physically impossible repulsiveness lightly broke Shin's hard but brittle mind.

" ----------!!"

The soundless scream roared in the night sky - and disappeared.

Part 4

"Yo"

" - huh?"

His shoulder abruptly clapped from behind, Isurughi Daiki's body shook.

Looking over his shoulder as if he was flipped, there was a man without any feeling of tension and a relaxed smile.

"Yagami-san! "

Containing the fact he had been frightened, with a tone full of criticism, Daiki called out the man's name.

"What have you done until now? You made the Chief be worried about you!"

"That so? I thought about showing my face around here, though"

Without caring about the criticism, Kazuma shrugged his shoulders.

That attitude, so very usual, secretly made Daiki relieved.

"What, isn't he completely alright?"

'Don't make eye contact'

'Don't defy him in any way'

'Avoid getting in touch with him as much as possible, take refuge immediately and report the place he's at afterwards'

- What was Kirika pointing to her subordinates the way to interact carefully with Kazuma as if he was some sort of atrocious criminal, Daiki felt like it was entirely unnecessary.

Even his smiling face, lively and a little cynical, even his casual attitude with no affectation unlikely for the Jutsushi with the highest rank in this world, there was nothing unusual.

A dangerous presence was not to be found.

"I should tell the Chief when she returns. That "There's no need to worry."

Even though a policeman, Daiki was nothing more but a newbie who had only just been assigned.

The skills of a police detective such as the insight to see through the true feelings hidden behind a smiling face had yet to appear.

Consequently, not realizing Kazuma's eyes were entirely not laughing, Daiki interacted with him just like before.

"So, I don't know where you've been or what you have been doing but did you find something?"

"Absolutely nothing. Your way?"

At the light retort that betrayed his expectations, Daiki let out a dry laugh.

"Ha ha.....instead of progress, the problems increased"

" - Did something happen?"

"Utsumi Kousuke escaped"

"....."

Kazuma looked slightly upwards and was silent.

Ten seconds passed. And then, looking at Daiki holding his breath and waiting for Kazuma's reaction, he replied with a serious face.

"Who is that?"

"Whaaaa!?"

Daiki collapsed.

"Is that comedic stupidity? It's the spell user acting violently at Ayano-san's school!"

".....aah, now that you mention it there was that story"

Finally remembering, Kazuma made a small nod. As if searching around for memories, he spoke slowly.

"But, didn't you catch him? The barrier there is not something an amateur can break, no?"

"Yeah, that's right but -"

Pulling himself together, Daiki explained the situation with a serious face. As the story progressed, Kazuma's face became more and more sharp.

"humph - I see"

For one moment all expression disappeared from Kazuma's face. From the ruin of the smiling face mask came undone, a terribly dry and hollow face with no make-up peeked.

But Daiki didn't became aware of it.

"I understand. I'll also look for him"

"Aah, we're saved"

Without showing distrust towards Kazuma's words, who instantly smoothed over his facial expression, he was innocently glad.

"Ooh, this became a major incident. Even though we're short-handed even at the best of times, we even had to guard the girl Utsumi is aiming at!"

"Well, it can't be helped right? It's Ayano's acquittance. If you were to make a blunder she could kill all of you in a fit of anger. Even Kirika's desperate, right?"

"........I don't think Ayano-san is that kind of person."

"........aah?"

Kazuma raised his eyebrows quizzical and Daiki started to justify himself red in the face.

"Aah, no, you see, there's no special meaning, ugh..... Ayano-san is a kind person, so maybe she won't have such an unreasonable behavior or something.....it's...it's just that! Deeper feelings than those, I really....."

"Aah....., well, isn't that fine?"

With a careless expression, Kazuma interrupted the excuse that continued for too long.

"I think that's a peculiar taste but it's got nothing to do with me."

" - You're not mad?"

"Why would I?", asked Kazuma with a serious face.

"I think it would be terrible (for you) if it would turn out well but do your best. I'll secretly root for you"

"Ha, haaa....."

With an irrelevant expression, Daiki nodded his head ambiguously. Taking that as the end of conversation Kazuma announced.

"Well then, tell me if you find something new"

"Aah, yes, roger that. Yagami-san too, get in tough with the Chief as soon as possible"

"I said I understand"

Waiving his hand across his back, Kazuma vanished inside the crowd of people. Because he send off that silhouette, Daiki returned inside the Police Department to inform Kirika of this.

After this, charged with the crime of not contacting her immediately, Kirika turned her highest level of anger on Daiki - That is a digression.

After parting from Daiki, as a matter of course Kazuma tore off the smiling mask.

What became visible from inside, although having the same smile, carried the opposite emotion - a desolate, humorless, dark smile.

Scattering an ominous presence that would put the fear of God even into a yakuza, Kazuma stepped forward inside the crowd of people as if conquering an inhabited land.

"Utsumi Kousuke, huh.....?"

From that mouth chiseled in a smile one guy's name leaked out. The thoughtless, foolish boy who could see only under his nose.

Attached to that boy, the face of a girl came to his mind. He saw her once or twice through Ayano, a clever girl with a strong will carried in her eyes.

".....I can use this", laughed Kazuma raising his lips.

The word *heartless* doesn't even begin to describe the face smiling or rather sighing.

It was the face of a demon.

Chapter 3 - The ones doing secret maneuvers
Part 1

A door was opened suddenly without even knocking.

Both Bernhardt, enjoying dancing after a meal, and Lapis, who served at dinner shifted their attention on the door.

The face that was very similar to a toad looked at the two with haughtiness.

"Is it over? "

"Yeah"

Vesalius asked without looking surprised and the toad - Utsumi Kousuke, nodded in a manner not at all related to modesty.

"I perfectly made the power you gave me my own. No one is able to defy me now"

"Good for you", replied Bernhardt uninterested.

Sensing that monotonous tone was teasing him, Utsumi raised his eyebrows.

"Do you have some complaint? "

"Never "

Unperturbed by Utsumi's question heavy with intimidation, Bernhardt slowly shook his head.

"I am truly glad. No matter how accomplished one is, you managed to jump over <<Second Class>> and go straight to the <<Seed>>. Isn't it normal to worry? "

"Then.....it's fine"

Although sullen like an infant, in outline Utsumi showed consent.

"By the way, I plan to stay here for a little while....."

"Don't mind me"

Bernhardt agreed without hesitation.

"This Pandemonium exists for the sake of accommodating you, the chosen ones. What's more, at present you're the only <<Second Class>> <<Seed>> - you can be called elite among the elite. You can use it as you will"

He was adding one thing to another.

"Luckily, there are plenty of guest-rooms. "

"....."

Utsumi's body trembled at the chill of having his true intention seen through. But he immediately smoothed his face over and showed a nihilistic smile.

"You saved me some trouble"

Convinced of the fact that they didn't notice he became frightened from the bottom of his heart, Utsumi left the room.

"Fuu - "

At the small sound made by the closing door, Bernhardt showed a small smile and pressed the tea cup to his lips once more.

"No, he has a wonderful outstanding talent. If not for the issue of his outward appearance, he could be a prime field candidate. "

" - yes"

Lapis bowed her head slightly. Without missing that faint gap, Bernhardt observed his servant only by moving his line of sight.

"Are you dissatisfied? "

"…..no"

"Say it. I won't get angry.

Repeatedly asked a question, after a faint indecision, Lapis opened her mouth.

"I'm not…….dissatisfied. Just - "

"Just? "

"I am unable to understand Master's intention. "

"Hmm "

After showing a contemplating manner for a brief period of time, Bernhardt spoke.

"I understand what you're trying to say. The data gathering is almost over. Keeping at it further has no meaning. "

In silence Lapis consented.

"In addition, detaining that boy not understanding etiquette in Pandemonium has no reason. "

The nod this time came slightly quicker. Perhaps he peeked inside her skirt.

"Certainly it could be said it's meaningless stopping in this country further, for the sake of executing the *plan*. "

"Then, shall we go back to Headquarters? "

"Don't say stupid things"

Bernhardt curtly refused the servant's words.

"Why would we go home now? From here on it will become interesting. "

"Interesting.....?"

"That's right. We certainly accomplished our goal. But people who only live to accomplish goals are miserable creatures. Enjoying the process of arriving at one's goal not only by pushing forward on the shortest distance but straying from it at times - such flexibility is essential for a human. Do you understand? "

Gazing at her master talking about triumphantly, Lapis bends her head slightly to the side, looking perplexed.

"It's because I'm not human....."

"It has nothing to do with that. "

Bernhardt concluded clearly.

"If so, as a being with a heart, let me rephrase that. I don't remember creating you like a doll. It would be troublesome if you didn't follow my orders but making you to obey blindly would have been in vain. "

"......Do I even hold the flexibility to enjoy myself in the process? "

"Hmm, the ingredients for it are all supposed to be there. Or else - you don't want to meet him again? "

At those remarks that seem to tease her, Lapis' facial expression shook for the first time.

"I - "

Little by little, slowly, she spoke with those trembling lips.

"I am - "

Bernhardt quietly looked at Lapis, unable to continue those words, becoming silent altogether. In that gaze, something similar with love dwelt beyond a doubt.

"Hesitating is fine, being worried is fine. Those experiences will make your heart grow. Your heart, still resembling that of a puppet will bud from your own will. Understand that's why I assigned the greatest mission to you. "

"........yes, Master. As you please. "

Although still confused, Lapis nodded meekly.

The gap between that puppet-like reply and her contrastively bewildered facial expression satisfied Bernhardt exceedingly.

Part 2

Late at night - although spring, at these hours still unpleasantly cold, a Jutsushi from the Special Information Storage Room, Kurahashi Izumi was waiting inside the car for the enemy's attack.

"Haaah....."

She lost count how many times she let out a miserable sigh from her red lips.

She played with the handle in irritation and grumbled words she said a dozen times already.

"Geez, why must we do this? Even though he already have piles of stuff to do....."

"Well, it can't be helped right? "

Next to her, settled in the passenger seat, trying to shrink his large build in the constrained space, Kumagai Yuki spoke so to calm her.

"It's an refutable truth this is our responsibility since we let Utsumi escape. Besides, if we could seize Utsumi for a second time, we'll have a good clue about Pandemonium - "

"Shut up. Be silent, stupid. "

Izumi ruthlessly knocked down Kumagai's words trying to raise their will to work.

"I know that without you telling me. But since our man force is scarce even at the best of times, setting a 24 hour guard made of Jutsushi for the sake of a civilian who might or migt not be attacked, don't you think that's pointless? "

"........If you think so, wouldn't it have been better not to forcibly drag me here? I was in the middle of my work. "

"Hou - "

Izumi stared at the grumbling Kumagai with eyes closed partly giving an ominous expression.

"Let's hear it then, what is it that you can do while I'm not there? "

"No, that, I certainly cannot use my power but, if it's just a normal search then - "

"There are already excellent people for that who can do it a hundred times better. If you were to join them you'll only be a hindrance. "

"Uuu....."

His best objection mercilessly crushed, Kumagai groaned.

"Enough already, just go and buy something. It's getting suffocating with you inside the car. "

"Yes....."

Those were some arbitrary comments for someone who called him but Kumagai nodded without complaint. No matter how bossy the other party is, that manner was beyond submissive.

This man, was either extremely timid or the other person grabbed hold of his weakness or possibly both.

Anyhow, Kumagai shrunk his body as much as possible, got down from the car in low spirits and walked to the convenience store.

"Hump"

Glaring at that retreating figure, Izumi concentrated her consciousness on the surroundings lookout for the second time.

Although one might say she shouldn't have bothered. The barrier was already up. At the center of the house that was the subject of their protection, the amulets put up in twelve directions sanctified the interior of that space. Something as corrupted as a curse could never come inside.

She had that self-confidence. But -

"The Chief was unreasonable about this"

Kirika's indication was not to protect the barrier or retaliate. But search for where was Utsumi hiding by following the thread of intent and restrain him.

It's simple to defend against the curses of an amateur. As it is the opponent can be defeated and brought back.

In that case, according to the proverb *If you curse someone dig two graves* the Jutsushi who doubled the curse should certainly die.

But, if they were to do so the Pandemonium trail will come to an end.

Therefore, it was imperative to capture Utsumi. They established he was the only person to have a class change at the new Pandemonium.

- If it's you, you can do it♥ -

Do it yourself!

Although she spat at the unreasonable request made by her boss with a smiling face in her mind, Izumi was painfully aware of her honesty that didn't allow her to cut corners.

"Good grief...."

Deciding in her heart she will once again vent her anger on Kumagai when he returns, she sharpened her awareness.

And after a few minutes - that, came along.

An impact that pressured her. The ominous surge of curses wrapping her body send shivers to the muscles along her spine.

"It's coming.....! "

While grimacing because of discomfort Izumi promptly made a seal.

"On Abakya Beiroshya Magabadara - "

She chanted the incantation as sections. The web of thought knitted in a complex manner entangled, seized and removed the curses.

"Kuuh, it's unexpectedly strong....."

She heard it was the <<Second Rank>> but those were some rough hexes that exceeded her expectation. They were pushing forward like a violent horse on the invisible barrier that blocked his way.

"But, it's not so bad I can't control it! "

There's no need to resist against power with power. If the opponent's ability is powerful, it's better to stop the other side by sidestepping, handling and weaken his force little by little.

The difference between an amateur and a specialist is not power but the skill to accurately manage that power.

The force of those violent but unskillful thoughts, little by little but in a steady way, was reduced.

Izumi was fortifying her protection even more while simultaneously tracing those thoughts.

" - !? "

She could swore. She didn't make any mistake. But the instant she searched for Utsumi's whereabouts, the twelve amulets simultaneously lost their effectiveness.

It wasn't the reaction of burning off because they couldn't endure the curses and burst. This was -

"The amulets have been physically destroyed!? He came here personally!? "

Without thinking Izumi shouted but she immediately rejected that reasoning.

A few days ago, when they interrogated him after the arrest, they thoroughly investigated that thing's personality. Utsumi was consistently an menial, underhanded man.

Naturally, it's impossible for him to bravely defy a danger.

His brand of magic, the power to attack from a separate place where he's safe, it's something truly suitable for him.

"Then, he has an accomplice? "

That was also improbable. Who the heck would become an ally to such a vulgar man? -

There were a lot of questions but now was not the time to indulge in speculation.

Right now, the girl she should protect had been presented in front of Utsumi in a completely defenseless condition.

"Kuu....."

Kicking the door, Izumi rushed outside. But the foot that was about to break into a run was forced back after the first step.

"Yo. It must be difficult staying up so late. "

That voice without any tension came drifting from before her eyes.

For how long he'd been there, deceiving even Izumi's perception fully concentrated on searching for the enemy, the man stood straight on her way.

Izumi asked in a subdued tone.

"Yagami Kazuma - why are you here? "

"Why, you ask. That's - "

With an attitude that was frivolousness itself, the man - Kazuma, laughed carelessly.

His manner was so relaxed he didn't seem to recognize the situation but Izumi understood it was impossible.

"Of course, it's for the sake of catching Utsumi and make him tell where Pandemonium is. Our goal is the same for the time being so I'm lending you a hand. You should be very grateful, no? "

Kazuma spoke with the usual lax expression and turned his back to Izumi. And then he walked to Nanase's house without change.

But, Izumi didn't move. Her sharp gaze pierced Kazuma's back and said:

"You're making fun of me"

".....Aah? "

Kazuma looked over his shoulder puzzled.

"Did you think you alone are enough? It's wonderful that you have pride but you should take the help when it's offered. That way is more comfortable - "

"Do you think you can deal with me the same way like that Isurughi boy? "
Ignoring Kazuma's frivolous talk, Izumi informed him coldly.
A brief period of silence - and then Kazuma turned his body around.
An opaque, unreadable gaze seized Izumi.
"What do you mean? "
"There's something I previously heard about from Chief. When you're manifesting your true power, that pupil is shining blue. "
In a wooden tone Izumi spoke those words that seemed unrelated to the present condition.
"That brilliance can't be compared to that of gems, it's a cool and clear, vibrant, thoroughly blue like the perfectly clear sky or a pure lake. "
"What of it? "
It was a monotonous, quiet question. But without feeling hesitant as Kazuma's facial expression was gradually disappearing, Izumi declared.
"Your eyes right now - are red to the point of being sinister. "
"You may have tricked Isurughi but you won't trick me! Answer! What did you plan to do coming here? "
"……that's, right……"
Showing a faint hesitation at the vehement cross-examination, Kazuma murmured in an inaudible voice.
"At present, you're a nuisance"
" - !!"
Overpowered by that dreadful surge, Izumi leaped as if she was repelled. At the same time she took amulets from her bosom and -
"I won't kill you. Sleep for a while. "
" - !!"
Reaching from an impossible place in the back, a low voice. The moment she tried to turn away in astonishment, a heavy shock shook her entire body.
When she opened her eyes, everything was already over.

Part 3

"……this is really……"
Next morning, receiving the report from Izumi who regained her consciousness by now, Kirika groaned as if she endured a headache.
In reality, she really has a headache. Why are so much troubles coming her way one after another? -
"Well, that's right……it's improbable she was killed so maybe that's a minimal providence"
"……ha"
At present, Nanase was unaccounted for. They regarded her as having been abducted by Utsumi by magic.

It didn't seem plausible more outsiders were were involved in this. Actually, a little after Izumi was rendered unconscious, returning from the convenience store Kumagai witnessed Nanase dressed in pajamas walking out like a somnambulist.

But then, as someone immediately made him faint, he couldn't confirm where was Nanase taken to.

".....I'm sorry"

"It can't be helped"

Kirika dared to show a bright smile to Izumi, apologizing for failure during her duty.

"Kazuma got in the way right? There are at most five Jutsushi in Japan who could possibly compete with that man - or maybe less? "

".....ha"

Even so, Izumi's facial expression didn't clear up. She must have been distressed because she made an error but since then her physical condition wasn't good.

"For now, take your time. You took quite a damage, right? "

" - Thank you"

Taking a standing at attention posture by pressing down her pain, saying words of thanks Izumi rested her back against the sofa intended for visitors. From her lips forcefully tightened, a long breath of relief escaped.

"That's pretty painful.....what did he do to you? "

"It appears that I was hit by some sort of vibration wave. The doctor said that all my bones, muscles and internal organs received the same amount of damage. "

"I see"

Since Kazuma is manipulating the air and wind that sort of attack is easy for him. And since he didn't quickly and easily cut her head and she improved enough to get up in just one night it means he went easy on her -

"Does this means a minimal amount of reason still remains? "

" - You think so? "

Although that was formulated like a question, Izumi's reply was loaded with distrust from the bottom of her heart.

"I think we have no choice but to consider that man our enemy. "

"Hmmmmm, but I think our goal is the same.....the problem is the means one selects. "

Breathing a sigh at the troublesome issue, Kirika allowed Izumi to leave.

"Sleep for a while in the man room. Because at dusk you'll come with me to explain this to Ayano-chan. "

".....roger that"

With a bitter voice and a nod, Izumi left the office.

The indication of a critical situation was filling the room to the brim.

The silence was painful.

Inside the extremely uncomfortable air, Kirika looked around her surroundings moving only her eyeballs.

Since this time she visited for a personal report so to speak, Juugo wasn't present. Genma was the same and Ren didn't return yet.

Izumi could be called her ally but her pride wasn't low enough to try raise the young girl's spirits.

That is to say, the kind of person to remove the pin from a grenade that explodes twenty eight seconds after or to pull the trigger five times at Russian roulette or try to soothe Ayano giving off that kind of presence doesn't exist here.

While in a formal posture Kirika changed her center of gravity forward.

As if ready to run as fast as possible in case of explosion.

"Say it.....once more"

Ayano squeezed out the words with an expression that seemed to crush something to death.

Kirika repeated the same words as before in the same tone.

"Kudou Nanase-san was abducted. It's likely it happened because of Utsumi - "

'Dann!'

The sound of the table pummeled with an open palm cut Kirika's explanation.

"So, what are you doing here? ", Ayano asked quietly in a low voice.

"Rather than coming here for worthless excuses, don't you have something more pressing? "

"At present we have no clue. The investigation is making progress but - "

"Don't use such official media announcement words with me! Where is Nanase!? "

"If we knew that a rescue mission would have been carried out long ago"

That obviously irresponsible reply would have rubbed the irritated Ayano the wrong way even under normal circumstances.

She shouted in fury.

"Is this the place to underestimate me!? Just when the fuck will you be satisfied repeating the same unsightly failure over and over? "

" - tch!"

Unable to bear the outrageous criticism of her mistake from of all things the relative of the man who got in her way, Izumi scowled at Ayano.

"Do you think *you* have the right to say such things - "

"Izumi"

"Let her. If you have some lame ass excuse how about spilling it? "

Ayano's provocation full of cynicism stirred Izumi's anger in spite of Kirika's restrain.

Those two's belligerent eyes gave off violent sparks in the space between.

"....."

Instantly the option of turning her back to these two and running away from here at full speed tempted Kirika pretty seriously.

But of course she actually wouldn't give in to mere temptation and deeply bowed her head to Izumi who took the initiative.

"No, this time it was our fault and we have no way to explain it. I'm sorry. "

"....."

Although Izumi frowned, reluctant from the bottom of her heart, Izumi also imitated her. As expected, she couldn't act cocky by herself when her boss was bowing her head.

".....it's, fine....."

Having no choice but to accept the peace offering, Ayano also bowed. Her fervor was reduced, she accepted the apology in a small voice and as Kirika was raising her head, she recovered her usual tone.

"So, won't you start explain the state of affairs already? "

"Well - just like Ayano-chan says, it seems that lately we do keep losing at best but it's impossible for us to lose to Utsumi. "

"Basically you're saying someone helped him. No way, did Bernhardt came out? "

Kirika shook her head a little.

"No. But according to your way of thinking, perhaps someone much more troublesome. "

"More troublesome than Bernhardt - "

"Your relative"

"Eh? "

Ayano blinked at Izumi's words.

Relative - meaning some member of the Kannagi Clan. If that person was more troublesome than Bernhard, the members of the branch families could be excluded.

But, for someone in the main family to be foolish enough to associate with Utsumi -

" ----------! "

Opening her eyes wide Ayano stared at Kirika.

"Wait, no way....."

Accurately reading the question that couldn't be put into words, Kirika nodded.

"It's Kazuma. "

"....you're lying....", murmured Ayano in a hoarse voice.

"Wha....what does that mean? "

"I don't know", replied Kirika extremely honestly.

"But, it's the truth. He interfered with Izumi's jutsu, and although indirectly he helped Utsumi. "

"Wait, just wait! Why would Kazuma do such a - "

Ayano promptly cut Kirika's reply but remembering Kirika's story from yesterday her complexion changed.

"He - no way, did he joined Bernhardt for the sake of Tsoi Rin - no, Lapis? "

"I don't think so. The opposite, rather. "

"Eeh?"

"Utsumi had his class change at the new Pandemonium, right? "

" - !!"

That's right, Utsumi has an utility value just like Kirika said. He visited the new Pandemonium so he was the only person able to identify it at the moment. Therefore -

"That's why.....if he let Utsumi go free, he can find Pandemonium's new location, maybe"

"Yeah"

"That's why....he ignored Nanase's kidnapping? "

"It seems so. Utsumi is nothing but a high schooler. It would be difficult for him to prepare a place he could confine an abducted girl. The possibility he is relying on Pandemonium is high. Pandemonium too is favouring Utsumi. "

Pandemonium - Bernhardt went as far as opposing the police to secure Utsumi.

Because his behaviour was so pushy, Utsumi's value was recognized. Even the degree of convenience for continuing hiding one person was plotted before.

For Utsumi and, for at least one more person.

"Wait.....just wait a second....."

Driven by a sense of urgency she couldn't even explain to herself, Ayano held back Kirika's words.

She understood the reason. She agreed to the effectiveness of the method. But -

"Certainly, Kazuma is a scoundrel, he doesn't choose the methods for his goal and he can declare he doesn't care about other people's problems without bating an eyelid....."

He's arrogant, he's self-centered, he's violent and lazy - he has so many defects one day is insufficient to count them all but, but even so -

"He, he wouldn't do such a thing.....that's, that's unconditionally not the way he does things! "

"Yeah"

Without showing any particular reaction to the passionate defense, Kirika nodded blandly.

"Certainly until now - or rather, the Kazuma after he returned to Japan, I don't thing he's do such a thing. But, right now Kazuma went back to the way he was before he carried out his revenge. Be careful, it's possible he may kill

even you if you were to get in his way. Think of him like a fundamentally different person and deal with it without showing weakness. "

"…….was he so dangerous in the past? "

Ayano asked timidly and although Kirika was remembering the past, she drew back with a rather cold expression.

"……..extremely so"

It was something that happened a little over two years ago.

She had an unofficial offer for becoming the Chief of the Special Information Storage Room, she had already become a police bureaucrat by taking the government official exam so she left for London for training.

That place is the center of modern days occultism. Their countermeasures for Spirit crimes are perfect compared with Japan's.

In one of those days where she continued to learn the practical know-how endorsed by history and actual results, during a certain incident, Kirika met him.

His body clad in frozen wind, the Fujutsushi similar to the god of death.

At first she thought he was the criminal. That's how strong the aura of <<Death>> released from his body was.

Although terrorized by that overwhelming power, Kirika chased after him determined and before she knew they reached to a common front -

"After all, that incident was resolved because of Kazuma but I didn't feel the least bit grateful."

While shaking her head irresponsibly, Kirika spoke.

"Before feeling glad the incident was resolved, I was first and foremost happy I'll never have to see him again. Frankly, I never wanted to see him again. "

But even so, unable to forget about him, she continued collecting information about him by all possible means. And then, approximately one year after, the almost fantastic gossip that <<The Contractor killed Erwin Salazar, the leader of *Almagest*>> reached her ears but that was a story that didn't matter now.

"Huh, so it was like that……."

Ayano unintentionally agreed with the excessively severe criticism but reminded of the time she met Kirika for the first time, her expression became grim.

"Compared to that, you were on pretty good terms in Japan, huh? "

The appearance of two people coming out of the love hotel district with their arms linked wasn't a supporting attitude for *"I don't want to be together with him"* or *"I don't want to meet him again"*.

Returning a bitter smile to Ayano's glare, Kirika lightly shrugged her shoulders.

"It doesn't mean I'm the one who approached him, you know? Kazuma was the one to call out to me. You also know how he behaves."

As far as Kirika is concerned, that was a meeting that should be called world-shaking.

The man she thought she never wanted to meet again, the man so ominously gloom he seemed the embodiment of death, talked to her with a frivolous smile, saying *"Yo - it's been a while"*.

"I thought what on earth happened? To make someone change that much. All that day long I couldn't calm down thinking something must have bewitched me. "

" - Well, that may have been true"

Ayano agreed ambiguously.

Kazuma's image described by Kirika is that of a completely different person from the one she knows.

She really has no idea just what must one experience to change that much.

"Did something happen.....? "

"I don't know that"

Kirika replied coldly, thinking about Kazuma's past.

"Maybe he felt exhausted after carrying out his revenge or something else happened after that? Rather than wasting time asking the person itself would be better. What's important right now - "

Her facial expression stiffening again, Ayano continued.

" - is that Kazuma returned to how he was before. "

"Yes. Be careful. For the sake of killing Bernhard Kazuma won't care what methods he employs. If for the sake of finding Pandemonium razing Shinjuku to the ground is necessary he'll do it without a second thought. No matter how many thousands or tens of thousands must die for that purpose."

"....."

"To put it bluntly, right now Kazuma is more dangerous than Bernhardt. If we won't somehow stop him....."

"....."

" - Ayano-chan? "

Kirika stared puzzled to Ayano's continuous silence. Noticing that gaze, Ayano raised her head and showed a feeble smile.

"Aah, that's right.....If we won't somehow stop him, right.....?"

Unbecoming for her, her voice had no aspiration. But it wasn't just because the unreasonable demand of stopping Kazuma was pushed onto her.

"Is there a problem? "

"Aa, yeah.....not really a problem but.....", murmured Ayano in a frail manner.

"I just thought how much did Kazuma loved that Tsoi Rin girl....."

Enough to throw away everything without regret, for the sake of just one girl. Enough to forsake it all, be it morals or righteousness without looking back -

"That's right. To make matters worse he's glorying her because of her unnatural death. It will be very hard to change his mind, Ayano-chan. "

"N- no, that's wrong, I don't really - "

"Look here, this is an earnest conversation. "

Controlling Ayano who shouted taking the joke seriously, Kirika informed her with a serious face.

"I'll be troubled if Ayano-chan doesn't want to win against Tsoi Rin. "

"Wh- why? "

Overpowered by Kirika pressing closer, Ayano's upper body was bent backwards.

"Right now Kazuma is captured by his past. No, he continued being so until today. He just concealed it inside his heart. "

"....so? "

"Because of the shock of having his emotional scars hidden even from himself exposed, Kazuma lost sight of himself. For the sake of returning his sanity, it's of utmost importance that a more valuable <<Present>> than the <<Past>> Tsoi Rin must be thrust before his eyes. The only one who can do it is you. "

"M- Me!? "

Kirika nodded as if it was was a matter of course at the horrified Ayano.

"Yes, you. Who else is there? "

"W- well.....aah, hey, how about Ren of Father - "

"Those two may have some effect but both Ren and the Suzerain were also important to the past Kazuma, right? On that point, Ayano-chan is only important for Kazuma right now"

"Am I.....important? "

"Stop sleep-talking already"

Sinking Ayano's question, red in the face, without hesitation, Kirika tried to encourage her in a cheering voice.

"Do your best!"

".....what is going on...", murmured Ayano in a hollow voice.

At the time Tokyo Government Office collapsed, for the sake of protecting Lapis - Tsoi Rin, Kazuma turned his blade to Ayano.

It seems that was an unconscious attack but that's exactly why it was act of his true feelings, without affectation.

For the sake of protecting *the* most important person, Kazuma fired that wind blade. In other words, that was the conclusion right there.

"What are you trying to tell me to do? "

She returned a gaze seeking for help but -

"I have expectations from you"

- but Kirika irresponsibly cheered on her.

"You're the one qualified to stop that man as you're from the same family, right? "

Izumi pushed the responsibility onto her as if it were natural. There was no escape.

"Aah, well....."

For the time being, Ayano tried to change the subject. It didn't seem likely the feat of regaining her footing with Kazuma was possible but for the sake of attempting to experiment with such grand ideas, she must find first Kazuma's whereabouts.

First of all, she tried asking about that. The answer was quick.

"I don't know where he's located but I pretty much understand what he's doing. First of all, he's been systematically hunting <<Second Class>> <<Seeds>>. "

" - seeds? "

Hearing that word for the first time, Ayano tilted her head to the side.

"Aah, it's the name given to the people with abilities from Pandemonium. That's the latest fashion. Regarding themselves as some sort of seeds, after repeating a <<Second Class>> and a <<Third Class>> class change, they'll sooner or later wake up a great existence, apparently that's the meaning. There's also the next race of people. "

"Is this something they made for themselves? "

"It seems that's what they're thinking."

"Are they wrong? "

As Ayano's questions piled up, Kirika shook her head slightly.

"We have no positive proof. But it seems the name was spread in just one night. "

"Then, did Pandemonium name them? "

"Probably. If that's true, the word seed must have some meaning. But the kids only think of themselves like <<Seed>>. "

"Actually, a seedbed is necessary to grow a seed. "

As Ayano continued, Kirika replied with a nod.

"What they're eagerly waiting for, it the time the seed will hatch out - that it, they'll have had enough nourishment, the time for destroying and loosing everything"

"Waah, that's dark stuff....."

That name full of ill-will made Ayano frown. She continued full of pity.

"On top of that, Kazuma's aiming at them - misfortune never comes singly."

So, Kazuma was excitingly running wild in the midst of it all. While imagining such ill-omened thing, Ayano timidly asked.

"Is he perhaps killing all of them? "

Kirika slowly shook her head. But, it was to early for relief.

"They're alive. Or to be exact, I should say they're not dead. "

"........Is it that bad? "

"They don't have that degree of physical damage. If they could rehabilitate, they should be able to return to their everyday lives. The problem is their mind.

"Have they been broken because of too much fear? "

"yes"

With a serious look Kirika agreed to the question that was supposed to be a joke. For a short while, Ayano petrified with her frozen smile in place.

"What? "

"It seems Kazuma tried to infer Pandemonium's location directly from the memories of those people. And extracted first hand information directly from their brains using a strange esoteric tool. "

"Directly from their brains, you say? "

"Directly in the literal sense. By thrusting his fingers inside the brain and stirring it up, it seems he somehow collects memories this way. "

"Weeh....."

Inadvertently imagining that spectacle, Ayano turned pale. But at the same time, she remembered a small problem hearing those words.

"Don't humans die after someone stuck fingers in their brains? "

"Well, depends on the place. "

In the world there are very strong people who walked into hospitals with steel frames running through their heads. The brain is the most vital organ but it doesn't mean that once it's damaged it results in certain death.

"Besides, in this situation there's no physical damage to the brain. There's no hole in the head. But, it seems the pain is very unusual. Everyone lost their sanity. "

".....will they heal? "

"Only god knows, right? "

"...Kazuma..."

Never before so bitter and so heavy, Ayano naturally called out the name of the man she called her partner.

The more she heard about him, the behavior of that man was totally different from the Kazuma she knew.

Honestly, she doesn't believe it - no, she doesn't want to believe it.

"Is that really Kazuma? "

"There are quite a few eye witnesses. The unidentified <<Wind User>> is quite the talk among the <<Seeds>>"

"I see.....hmm? Wait, but.....? "

"What? "

"When you said he's thoroughly hunting them down, does that mean only those who class chaged at the new Pandemonium? "

"No"

Immediately and with clarity, Kirika denied.

"Wouldn't that be pointless? "

For example, even if the <<Seeds>> have some sort of information, if it's about the old Pandemonium, it's worthless. Because that one already became extinct.

"What is he thinking? "

"We won't know exactly unless asking the person itself but will you listen to my reasoning? "

Ayano urged for the continuation with a small nod.

And then, Kirika started talking.

"He's playing with Pandemonium - with Bernhardt. "

"He's playing? "

"Yeah. I cannot imagine the basis for his self-confidence and composure but Bernhardt is playing with the angered Kazuma even now. Right now Pandemonium doesn't make an appearance but it's not hiding itself. It's waiting to be discovered. "

An RPG character collects hints via quests, in order to discover the Devil King's castle -

"Kazuma understands this. That's why he's surely thinking Pandemonium can't possibly conceal itself perfectly. If I were to collect information and solve the mystery, I can establish its specific location or something. "

At those last words, Ayano's shoulders dropped suddenly.

"or something, huh? "

"Isn't it reasonable? I have no proof. ", retorted Kirika calmly.

"But, let's assume this explanation for the time being. At least, if that Kazuma lost himself in anger, I don't think he would notice something like that. "

".....that may be, huh? "

"So, since it's like that, I'm counting on you♥ "

"....."

Ayano glared Kirika with half opened eyes, pushing an unthinkable burden onto her with a smiling face. Suddenly shifting her gaze Izumi's figure came into focus, similar to the boss next to her.

With all due respect, since she was probably easily manipulated by Kirika and won't find a drop of sympathy in her, deeply, deeply, Ayano breathed a sigh.

"What are you trying to tell me to do? "

Of course, there was no reply.

Part 4

In the park a dry wind was blowing through, Kazuma was solitary looking at the sky.

There was no one around.

As the <<Seeds>> given power by Pandemonium were loitering around, it produced a change in Shinjuku.

There were no more homeless people.

To such an extent that the wide park that always had a homeless community, was now completely empty. Of course, it wasn't the result of the metropolitan government.

They had literary been completely *exterminated* by the <<Seeds>>.

Right now various parks in Shinjuku were turned to battlefields for <<Seeds>>.

As flying-about fireballs or electric shocks were hurting his eyes he immediately escaped to this place.

The number of people that stayed behind was big but they were dim-witted enough not to have a sense of danger.

Those people that even at the best of times didn't show self-restraint have now obtained a power law cannot judge.

No matter how the situation turns out, pondering about it doesn't amount to anything.

The result was that the homeless around Shinjuku were eradicated. But the parks became less accommodating for normal people that before.

It's only natural. The <<Seeds>> were only fighting at night but there aren't any people who thread on the blood-stained pavement on their own accord.

"Well then....."

Looking up at the sky in the inhabited park Kazuma felt solitary.

Close to his field of vision the cherry trees were in full bloom. Right now they were blossoming in full glory but not one visitor came for cherry blossom viewing.

It was a pretty queer spectacle.

The cherry blossoms dyed light pink because dead bodies were buried at its roots - remembering that famous legend, his lips curved imperceptibly.

"That means, next year they will bloom beautifully, I have no doubt. It's deplorable it won't be in time for this year"

Embracing such black thought, Kazuma sharpened his consciousness.

Last night, exactly at this place, Nanase suddenly disappeared.

Space transfer. But, even for the net immediately stretched around ten kilometers in all four directions couldn't find Nanase's presence. If that's the case, it can be assessed she didn't return to the normal space.

It's likely that Pandemonium was here somewhere, at the center of the Shinjuku Public Park.

More accurately, somewhere in the hyperspace overlapping the park, quietly hiding itself.

He can't find the specific location but if he were to randomly cut all the space around here, he could eventually find it.

Of course if he were to disturb the space construction to that extent the backlash would be amazing and so would be the damage to the surroundings but for Kazuma right now that's not something worth taking into account.

But, Kazuma didn't take such drastic measures.

A countermeasure for such a *foul play* route had surely been arranged.

Even for Kazuma, releasing such a huge amount of power would be followed by the creation of a gap.

It was a slight gap he didn't have to worry about with mediocre opponents but if he plays against Bernhardt that gap can become lethal.

"Geez, is the game not ending yet? Don't irritate me Bernhardt. If you put on too much airs.....you won't die easily...", he murmured full of hatred.

Forming swirls, the wind was scattering the sakura flowers.

Immediately following -

"Oi, he's here! This way! "

A crude shout violated the silence, followed by a clutter of footsteps.

Five people appeared and encircled Kazuma, who didn't show any worth mentioning reaction. The sound of chewing gum resounded strangely offensive to the ear.

"We searched for you, <<Wind User>>"

One of the men started talking with a vulgar smile. Looking only for a second at the man without any kind of interest, Kazuma immediately returned his gaze to the cherry blossom overhead.

As if he found some sort of entertainment in that reaction, the man laughed even louder.

"Kee, you can't make eye contact because you're too scared, you worthless bastard. It's been said you hunt all <<Seeds>> but you probably use some unfair trick to fuck them, huh? "

As of now, the man who didn't see that five surrounding one was also cowardly made fun of Kazuma. Keeping in tune, the other four also raised loud laughter.

"Do you want something? "

"*Do you want something?*. Yes, we do actually. Very important something. "

Repeating Kazuma's dull and interesting words, the man raised his middle finger. And then informed him.

"Die"

Moreover, he made the sign of slicing his throat with his thumb and sticking that finger out.

"Die. Die and give me all you XP points. You were born only for that. Only to feed me!! "

The resounding scorn of the five part chorus. With woken-up eyes Kazuma turned to those men that didn't doubt their superiority.

"Did you say you searched for me? "

"Yeah. A mail came from Pandemonium yesterday. Saying that anyone who kills you receives a huge amount of XP. Although you don't seem all that much but - well, it seems like a bonus game. "

" - I see, a bonus game, huh? "

Tempted to laugh by the excessive black humor, Kazuma's shoulders shook.

He suddenly seized the truth of this man's words. The only wrong point was *for whom* was the bonus game but he will probably notice immediately.

"Whatever, if you say you'll give them to me, I'll take them. "

"Aaah? Are you still talking while half asleep, bastard? "

The man that still didn't notice he was a sacrificial pawn, was enraged by Kazuma's words.

"I'm the one who'll take them! This <<Fang>>-sama will class change with the XP given by your death! Don't misunderstand your place! "

The man - <<Fang>> roared loudly and leaped, aiming at Kazuma. Slightly later, so were his comrades - or maybe his subordinates.

That was exactly the time when the footsteps of a new character resounded.

A while ago - dragged like usual by Kanon and Serisawa, Ren was strolling in the Shinjuku Central Park.

The rumor of <<Seeds>> ferociously exercising their authority in Shinjuku had no meaning for those fearless kids. Rather there was an atmosphere that made one believe they came because they expected something to happen.

"Then what? Does that mean the incident is not yet over? "

"Yeah.....we let the enemy escape and Onii-sama disappeared....."

"Ren's Aniki, is that - "

"That really cool Onii-san!? "

"Aaah? "

Serisawa looked dubiously at Kanon, thrusting herself in their conversation.

"Was he that cool? "

The point-blank image Serisawa had about Kazuma was *<<a slacking playboy always laughing frivolously>>*. He heard that as a magic user his ability was high but it can't be helped, his attitude was beyond superficial.

"how to put this, that man seems totally laid back. "

"How stupid, isn't that fine? "

But it seems like Kanon's opinion was different.

"Creasing your brow and always looking like *I'm mustering all my power!* is ugly! Not showing mental strain even when risking one's life, that 's what it means being cool and composed in a life and death situation!"

"Is that how it is? "

Seeming reluctant to agree, Serisawa inclined his head to the side baffled.

But, something came to his mind and he snickered while grinning.

"But even so, you, it seems you're surprisingly pleased with Ren's aniki. How about you move on to him? "

"Don't say such stupid things. I'm all for Ren-kun. Besides, since Kazuma-san is his real brother, there's also the possibility Ren-kun will turn like that once he grows, right? "

Re agreed with a smiling face to Kanon's question.

"That's right. Onii-sama is my aspiration, my landmark. I thinking of becoming just like Onii-sama someday. "

"Meaning playing hooky during work and being yelled at by Ayano-san? "

"…….No, that bit is a little……."

As expected, he doesn't want to copy that.

The survival capacity of continuing to have Enraiha trusted at him almost everyday but survive without injuries is worthy of praise but - he has the feeling that seems to serve a slightly different purpose.

" - well, leaving behind Onii-sama's temperament"

"Aah, yeah, you said he disappeared. What do you mean? "

In a casual manner - or not, anyway as Ren tried to change the subject, Kanon followed his lead.

"Yeah, I think he's fine but I wonder why is he acting separately? "

"He doesn't want to be found at the present, right? Or, he doesn't want others to get in the way? "

Ren strongly negated Kirika's words resurrected in his ears.

"Isn't that impossible? How can I get in his way? Besides - "

It's impossible for Kazuma to disappear in front of his eyes, without saying anything. Ren strongly believed so.

This Kazuma is different from the one that left the Kannagi residence before.

Kazuma right now is strong, and affectionate. It's impossible for him no to care about the sadness of the person left behind.

"There's definitely some reason why he didn't get in touch. That's obvious. "

As if persuading himself, he repeated so in his heart. Many times over, many times over -

"Ren - Hey, Ren! "

Before he knew it, Serisawa was calling his name in a fairly loud voice.

"What happened? You were distracted. "

"Aah, yeah, I'm worried about Nii-sama"

"Worried? "

As if he heard something unexplainable, Serisawa was amazed. Ren nodded with a serious face.

"After all, it's different from just taking action separately, it's definitely strange he didn't even call. What if he can't move about because he's injured? "

With a sidelong glance at Ren, wholeheartedly worrying about his brother, Kanon and Serisawa exchanged glances.

"Am I the only one thinking that Nii-chan would survive the destruction of mankind with calm face? "

"Ï have to agree despite myself. "

Ren glared at the two, reaching the same unfeeling agreement, pouting.

"That's not true. Even Onii-sama is not omnipotent. He's human so he can fail. "

"Well, that may be true. "

"It is", replied Ren in an unusually blunt tone.

And then, pulling himself together he made a small nod and faced the two.

"Sorry. I don't really feel like hanging out today. I'm going home."

".....yeah"

"I'm sorry. I forced you to come. "

"No, that's fine - "

Trying to apologize once more to the friends pitying him, Ren gulped down his words.

As if covering for it, an angry voice could be heard from the middle of the park.

"Just now - "

Gesturing Serisawa to silence his loud voice, he was all ears. It was certainly audible. Although he couldn't understand the details if the matter, from the strength of the tone it didn't seem like a proper conversation.

The probability of finding ordinary people in Shinjuku at the present time was close to zero. It is possible a tourist may visit without knowing the situation but he would probably be frightened by the smell of blood soaked into the air and the bloodthirsty Kehai and retreat after advancing less that yen steps.

Then, the owner of the voice -

"What to do? "

Seeming to have reached the same conclusion, Serisawa asked in a hard voice.

"Before he finds us - "

After beginning to say they should run, Ren promptly changed his mind. Right now he wanted information by any means.

Those people with abilities making a ruckus inside had made a class change - and in addition to that, if there are people who made a class change at the new Pandemonium, he wanted to capture them by all means.

"I'll look a little. If you want to follow be quiet. "

Without wasting time for persuasion, Ren started walking at a quick pace. Confirming the duo who obviously followed him near his field of vision, he sharpened his sensitivity even more.

He immediately found a mark.

Without caring about public notice, at the center of his path, the presence of an impressive fighting scene was scattering.

Five men were surrounding another. But the moment he saw the face of the surrounded man, Ren's anxiety was turned to compassion for the five men.

Depending on numbers, they showed grins full of composure but -

"Nii-sa....."

The moment Ren began starting so, the fire men moved simultaneously. At the same time the man in the middle released his power.

The whirlwind that seemed to crawl on earth altogether broke the knees on those five men when they threw - no, when they tried to throw themselves upon him.

As if stuck by a car, the bodies of those men danced in midair.

Ren clearly saw their joints of their feet bent the other way.

Five serial falling sounds. Later by one beat, the shrieks of five vocal cords unpleasant to hear resounded far and wide.

The man standing still at the center of it, leisurely turned around.

Those dark pupils seized Ren, standing rock still in blank amazement.

"Ren? "

".....nii,sama"

Dumbfounded, nothing but dumbfounded, Ren continued to stare at the man - the brother he respected and loved, Kazuma.

"Who.....is he.....", he thought so, partly serious.

The man standing in front of his eyes was a completely different person from the Kazuma Ren knew.

That always present cheerful and fearless smile completely vanished without a trace.

That gloomy, bleak Kehai made Ren sharply catch his breath and Serisawa and Kanon hid behind him with stiff faces.

"Why, are you here? "

Without caring about their reaction, Kazuma's words were reprimanding.

"It dangerous around here. It's not a place for kids to loiter around. It will become safe very soon, so wait - "

Interrupting his words, he looked to the right. Ren followed his example.

The silhouette of a man trying to crawl along came into view. The <<Fang>> with smashed knees - Ren didn't know that name, but even so he was frantically crawling on the ground trying to run away from this place.

"Where are you going? "

Kazuma casually released the wind. The air cannonball shot out and hit the ground near the <<Fang>>, his body blown off by impact.

The <<Fang>> crashed into the trees with splendid force and fell to the ground as if gliding on the tree trunks.

Stepping up to the place he fell, Kazuma kicked the <<Fang>> lying upside down and turned him him over.

And then, his feet stepped with all his strength on that stomach.

"Guaaaaah! "

From <<Fang>>'s mouth, a mixture of screams and blood cloths gushed out.

Without caring about that, Kazuma fired another hit.

"Ni - Nii-sama! What are you doing!? "

Kazuma answered that Ren's dry shout, his facial expression changed, as a matter of course.

"I'm trying to pull out information about Pandemonium.....? "

"E- even so, using this sort of method.....you don't know whether or not he has that information! "

"He has it"

As if he talked about the obvious reality, Kazuma declared.

"This guys they were sent here for that purpose - for the sake of giving me that information, '**he**' prepared this chess pieces. "

"Eeh.....? "

"It's offensive being manipulated but I have no other option right now. I'll step on you for a while - so tell me already! "

A beating without forgiveness. <<Fang>>'s body was frailly convulsing.

That was maybe the same scene as always.

It wasn't unusual for Kazuma to inflict flows without pardon to those who challenged him without knowing their place, to those who stood in his way. *But* - thought Ren.

This is different

It wasn't about the severeness of the attack or the amount of given damage.

Something more basic and yet more definite, this was a deviation from Kazuma's acting - the Kazuma Ren knew.

"Nii-sama....."

"Ren"

Kazuma ruthlessly cut down Ren's words trying to stop that atrocious behavior.

An expressionless look seized Ren.

"Don't get in my way"

"....."

Faced with that cold rejection, loosing his words, Ren froze.

Without waiting for a reply, Kazuma restored his gaze to <<Fang>>.

"nii-sa....."

Ren tried to stop him a second time. But, his mouth was blocked from behind by Serisawa's hand.

He lifted him up without change and carried him away like a luggage.

In the space between that sequence of disturbance, Kazuma didn't even lift his eyes to look at them.

"Wh- wait Serisawa-kun! "

After being separated by at least a hundred meters, Ren finally untied Serisawa's hands.

"What are you doing? "

"It's not what! "

Serisawa knocked down Ren's unusually raised voice with several times the volume. He drew his head near as for a head-butt and shouted.

"Do you want to die!? You shouldn't have opened that sort of conversation! "

"What do you mean by that sort? He's my brother! "

"Even so! "

Although facing a Ren whose anger laid bare, Serisawa didn't took a step aside.

The instinct shared by all living things informed him he must unconditionally not return to that place.

His somewhat cold body shaking, the boy murmured.

"What was up with those eyes.....just what can happen, to make someone change that much? "

"That's...."

Lacking an answer, Ren cast down his eyes.

The reason for Kazuma's transfiguration, those feelings, Ren understood them at a personal level.

Because, he was just like his brother.

If someone would have resurrected Ayumi and tried to use her in some bad intrigue, even he wouldn't be able to maintain his sanity. He would absolutely, never tolerate it.

He couldn't possibly even think of it.

"That's right, I'd never forgive it. No matter by what means, I would give retribution without fail. Enough to make him regret he was ever born - "

Only by imagining his consciousness was burning. Unconsciously clenching his fists, Ren was burning with anger.

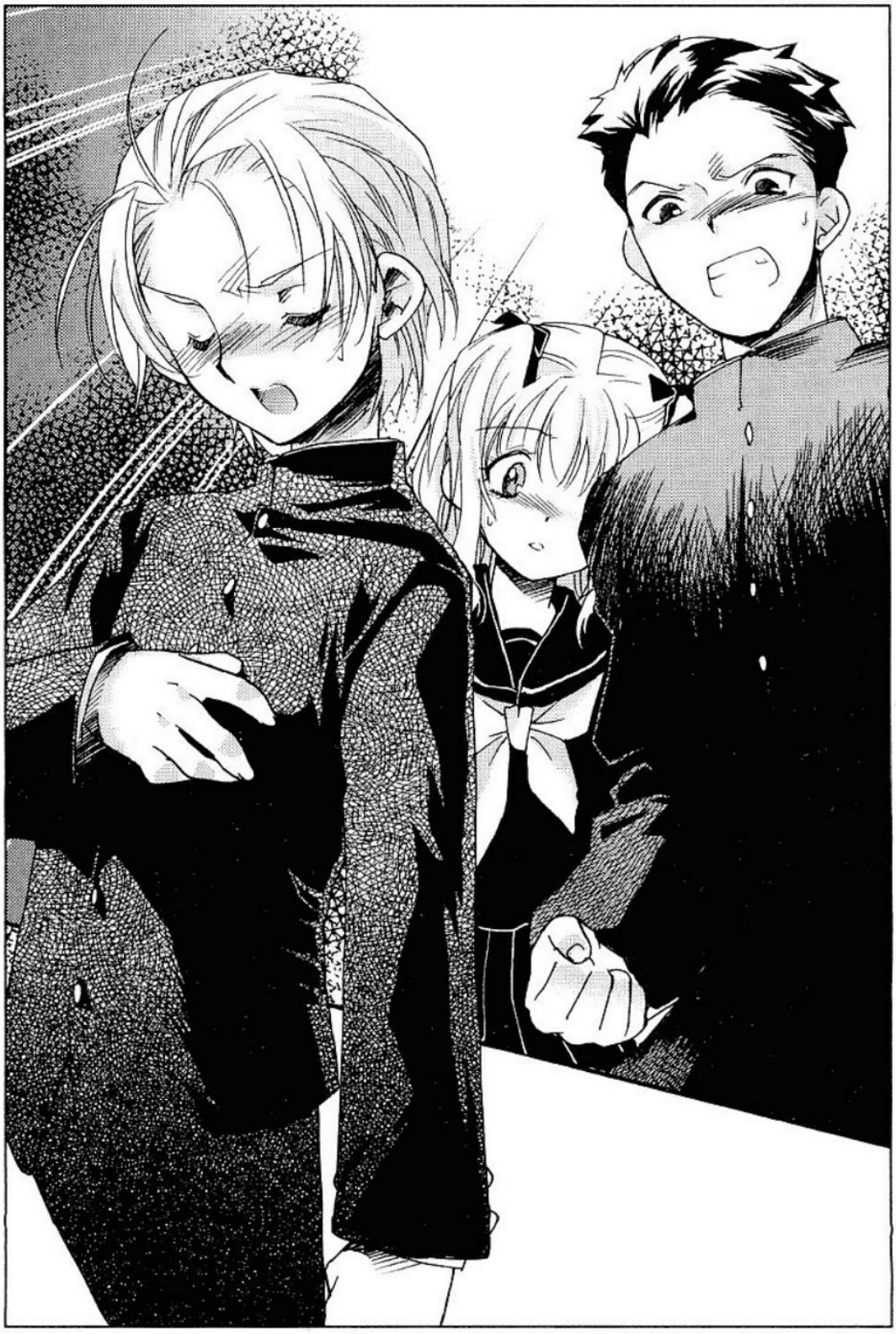
" - Hey Ren! What will happen if you snap too? "

A nervous shout calmed him down.

Looking, Serisawa was backing down with a stiff face, Kanon tried to use Serisawa's big built like a shield, hiding behind him.

Exhaling the pointless anger, Ren shook his head a little.

"I understand Onii-sama's feelings. To be honest, enough to want to cooperate with him. But - "



If he wound change to a vengeful demon, Ayumi would definitely be sad. That girl called Tsoi Rin would surely be the same.

"What he's doing is wrong. If you grieve over the death of someone, you definitely must become happy enough for both. You cannot be caught up in your past! "

Become happy - Ren believed that to be the greatest memorial service for the dead who loved you.

It does not mean to forget. It means to accept both painful and happy memories, to overcome them and become so happy death itself will go mad. That is the duty of the survivor.

Even if you're in despair, you cannot be forgiven for throwing away your future.

You're burdened with two lives. Why would one be forgiven for throwing away the burden of two?

"He must be stopped - "

Turning back, Ren started running towards the place Kazuma was. Voices that tried to stop him resounded from his back but he removed them from his consciousness.

He returned to that place in ten seconds. But Kazuma was already gone and only the five people severely wounded were convulsing in a pool of blood.

"Waah, awful.....", murmured Serisawa, who chasing after him, looking at the terrible spectacle before his eyes.

Certainly, that scene couldn't be expressed any other way. And the one who made it was no one else but his brother.

He couldn't ignore it.

"He must be stopped - he must absolutely be stopped - "

With that hard decision in his chest, Ren grasped tightly both his fists.

Chapter 4 - Determination and hesitation and...
Part 1

Lying upside-down on the bed in her room, Ayano let out a profound breath, emptying her lungs.

Burying her face in the pillow, she let out all her power. After several seconds -

"........Stopping Kazuma, huh........"

Those isolated grumbled words, naturally, reached no one's ears but her own.

A second sigh.

Sluggishly turning around, she looked upwards. She held her hand out in front of her eyes, blocking the fluorescent light.

"What are you telling me to do........"

That complaint without ambition vanished inside her chest without a voice.

No matter how she thought about it, there wasn't even a particle of a chance of success.

Just who on earth will try and stop that man who snapped and lost even his discrimination ability.

Recalling the conversation during the evening, Ayano let out a third sigh.

"Do you understand what you're saying - Ren? "

"Let's stop Nii-sama"

Entering the room, Ren declared so without even the returning home greeting.

At the abrupt thing, Ayano stared at Ren in wonder. And then, she scowled.

She perceived in the boy's eyes the same light of determination just like that time.

"Ren? What happened, so suddenly? "

Close to the bewildered Ayano, Kirika pointed a sharp gaze at Ren. She asked to verify.

"You met him? "

Ren nodded in silence.

"in Shinjuku. He was tormenting a group of five <<Seeds>> as he tried to find information about Pandemonium. "

"......Isn't that usual? "

Not understanding why Ren's expression was so stiff, Ayano replied in a light tone.

But, without showing her even the shadow of a smile, he declared with serious look.

"It's different. "

He had no hesitation and yet those eyes were carrying so much concern it was heartbreaking.

"That was different."

"........Ren? "

"........I see"

Contrastive to the bewildered Ayano, without showing her disturbance despite disappointment, Kirika accepted Ren's words as the truth.

Changing the cross-examination partner, Ayano pressed Kirika for an answer.

"Hey, detective Tachibana? "

"What? "

Kirika received it calmly, sipping from the tea that got cold.

"There's nothing really to be surprised about. The likelihood of the conjecture made only changed to a verified truth. "

"Verified, you say......."

"Rather than Kazuma changing, it's more like he returned to the way he was before. Not listening to Ren-kun trying to restrain him, on the contrary, not forgiving even him if he were to become an obstacle - or something like that. "

Fleetingly looking at Ren, Kirika searched for confirmation. Ren made a tiny, but clear nod.

"Did Kazuma.....Ren? "

Faced with the impossible situation, Ayano's consciousness froze.

She couldn't imagine that.

Ayano knew best just how much Kazuma was doting on Ren.

More important than anyone and anything, almost like a beloved child.

"That.....cannot be..."

"It's the truth. Accept it. "

But, the reality was even more unfeeling. Kirika's words woke up Ayano without asking whether she wants to or not.

"Ren.....?"

Trying to comfort a wounded boy or else trying to cling on someone she wants to deny this nightmare-like reality - not sure which was it herself, she sought Ren.

He was right in front of her eyes.

It seemed he drew near while she was in a daze. He went down on his knees on the tatami mat so that their eyes were at the same level and looked hard at Ayano with an earnest gaze.

"We're stopping Nii-sama", declared Ren without doubt in a tone loaded with determination.

"The fact that Nii-sama is angry, that he wants revenge is maybe to be expected. But, even if he would do so, no one would become happy. No one will be pleased. The number of sad people would only go up. "

"Aah, yes.....that's right"

"I want Nii-sama to smile, I want him to be happy! That's why, that's why this is - "

Visibly overawed by Ren drawing near, Ayano shrunk away little by little.

She understood those feelings very well. Extremely well, but -

"But, how?"

If he were to say he had a plan, she wanted to know it by all means. The plan *to stop* that man.

If the objective was *to kill* it may be possible.

If she, Ren and then Genma were to form a group and attack him, a Contractor as he may be, she didn't believe he could go against them.

However - when it comes to take him alive...

Is that not something impossible for humans? Ayano thought so, very seriously.

At the very least, it wasn't something Enraiha, specialized in offensive ability, could accomplish.

" ------hey, Ayano-chan"

While thinking so, Kirika meddled in with an amazed face.

"You, can you think of nothing but feat of strength since the beginning? "

"What else is there? "

Feeling she was made fun off, Ayano pouted.

"Ren's persuasion didn't work, right? If that's the case, it won't matter what I say"

".....No, you see, I want Ayano-chan to open Kazuma's eyes with her '**love**'"

"Sorry. That's outside my area of expertise. ", declared Ayano right away.

"Ayano-chan, don't you want Kazuma to return to normal? "

"I want it, of course I want it but do you want me to be all teary-eyed and say: *Forget about Tsoi Rin and look at me*❤ !?"

"Yes"

"Not even if I die!!"

A seemingly sad gaze pierced Ayano, who replied immediately.

"Nee-sama.....why are you saying such things? Do you hate Nii-sama? "

"This is not a problem of likes and dislikes! If I were to tell such chilly words, even the usual Kazuma will laugh scornfully! That's obviously useless! "

"It's not the usual Kazuma so it will be effective! "

"That's not true. "

Ayano blocked it all.

"That guy, doesn't see me as a *woman*."

".....well, anyway"

Trying to avoid a direct answer, Kirika said to both Ayano and Ren.

"I leave Kazuma to you. It doesn't matter by what means - just do something"

"Yes!"

"....."

Throwing a side-long glance to Ren replaying vigorously, Ayano scowled at Kirika with a sullen face.

But, without minding that attitude, Kirika bowed her head grandly absolutely satisfied and Ren's eyes gleamed as he gripped Ayano's hands.

"Nee-sama, let's do our best! "

"....."

Watching intently in silence the boy awfully full of fighting spirit, inside her heart, Ayano let out a deep, deep sigh.

"Geez....."

On her bed, Ayano tossed and turned, thinking about what she should do and what she can do.

No matter how she thought about it, it doesn't appear likely she can stop Kazuma. But -

- We're stopping Nii-sama -

She remembered Ren's words full of determination.

Because it's Ren, he must know about the fact that the difference in power between her and Kazuma is like that between heaven and earth, that it's close to impossible to stop Kazuma.

But even so, Ren declared Kazuma must be stopped no matter what.

That means, Ren judged Kazuma to be so much more dangerous right now. For his surroundings and, for Kazuma himself.

"What is he doing....?"

She recalled Kazuma's face from the time Tokyo Government office collapsed.

Anger, hatred and grief - a mix of many emotions and a disturbed, dangerous countenance unbelievable from the normal Kazuma.

She thought it was something transient.

She believed he already got back on his feet.

Kazuma - because it's Kazuma, he will be fine -

She believed so without question.

But, thinking about it calmly, Kazuma is just twenty two. Nothing else but what the society would call a *youngster*.

The unreasonable one is the one asking absolute power and immutability from him.

Thinking about it, Kazuma lost control of himself before.

For example at the time the man manipulating the running widely Ogami Misao gave his name, Michael Harley.

Or like when Ayano was about to finish off Lapis -

".....aau....."

Digging up an unpleasant memory, Ayano sunk into the bed once more.

She buried her head in the pillow and groaned feebly.

Tsoi Rin - the *enemy* Ayano must fight. The young lady idolized because of her death.

With such an opponent, how is she supposed to take Kazuma back.

"Besides, why do I have to - "

Saying she understood Kazuma's feelings was prideful maybe but she understood his feelings got hurt.

But even so, it doesn't mean he'll be forgiven no matter what.

Because of Kazuma, Nanase was abducted.

An ordinary girl who shouldn't have been involved in this world was swallowed up by the battle.

No matter what his reason is, she won't tolerate that.

"I decided. As I thought, I'll beat him down"

Screwing with both hands the innocent pillow, Ayano decided so.

The chances of success were exceedingly low, she didn't know the method but it was still better than the alternative and above all, she felt refreshed.

Feeling like she settled one more problem, Ayano's thoughts changed.

What she was most anxious of was the body of her friend kidnapped by Utsumi.

"Is Nanase all right....."

Part 2

A heavy silence was ruling the space.

The basement of a desolated, abandoned building.

That space, primary ruled by nothing but emptiness, was now full of a different kind of silence.

The number of humans reaching a hundred gathered in the great hall were giving birth to this silence.

A hundred human beings, the silence of a hundred.

That was clearly different from the silence born out of emptiness, it was a silence that made one feel a packed reaction.

But even if it was silence, it wasn't tidy by any means.

The air, the atmosphere were were only coercing to silence the group that was gathered here by no ordinary means.

Rather, you could say it was the antipode of it. There were rare groups of people but most of them were lone wolves that seemed to have forgotten the spirit of cooperation inside their mothers' wombs.

The <<Seeds>> rampaging on the stage called Shinjuku - all of them were gathered here. Not one was missing.

Properly speaking, it wasn't a likely event.

All those people who regarded others like nothing but more XP were gathered in this place.

It's impossible that conflict wouldn't arise.

But, they were waiting in absolute silence.

Although not being forced they canceled everything else, although they weren't ordered they refrained from fights, only waiting.

Without holding even the slightest doubt about the unnatural occurrence.

Then, at this place were everyone was gathered, just one regular person was mixed up.

- No, calling her normal was too much maybe, but at the very least she wasn't a <<Seed>>.

Without putting on air, she just observed the surroundings in a casual manner.

Men and women with bad disposition were filling up the hall. Of course, there wasn't any running electricity but the bonfires placed here and there illuminated the gloomy interior.

The atmosphere was so strained that if one were to throw a firecracker in, a great brawl would start on the spot.

Wrapped around by the atmosphere of that critical situation, the girl thought.

"I wonder, is there enough ventilation to build a fire inside such a small basement? "

The usually peculiar train of thought. The proprietor of a mental structure indifferent to the sense of urgency even this late in the game was obviously no one else but Ayano's close friend, Yukari Shinomiya.

The insides were the same as usual but on the outside, she had a fairly drastic image change.

She wore a black leather jacket and a tight miniskirt. Stiletto short boots. She daringly exposed her legs without any stockings, producing an obscene contrast between her all black outfit and her white skin.

What's more, her features were sharpened by the make-up and that image wearing thin sunglasses changed her to a completely different person from the usually gentle girl.

That appearance wafting with aggressive sex-appeal even made those muscled men want to call her *Nee-san*.

Such being the case, Yukari melted in the middle of the <<Seeds>> without feeling out of place and without scruple she started gathering information.

- Right now no one was talking so that means she couldn't get obtain anything.

But - suddenly, the silence was broken.

"-------?"

Feeling doubtful but without showing any of those emotions on the outside, Yukari observed the state of the surroundings.

The <<Seeds>> - all of them, strengthened the alertness and looked around with impregnable glances.

It seems they could feel something that escaped the regular human.

"Where....."

"Close....."

The <<Seeds>> all looking in different directions, without exchanging words or signals, collected their gazes in the same direction as if they previously agreed on.

The wall.

For Yukari it looked just like a usual wall. A bleak, bare, gray wall. There was nothing there to look at or to talk about -

"Eeh? Hey, is that - "

Drawing that conclusion, Yukari remembered a strangely uncomfortable feeling. She looked closely once more at the wall that was the focal point and then at those surroundings.

" - aah"

She suddenly noticed.

There wasn't anyone in front of that wall.

Those gazes didn't gathered there to look at it. From the beginning, that space gaping wide in front of that wall was becoming less crowded.

In spite of the fact that there were enough people inside the room to make one feel oppressed.

Especially carefully the bonfires were concentrated in front of the wall delimitating the space.

Once you realized it, it was obvious. That was a stage. The curtain bells were heard, the spectators focused on the stage, it was only that.

"'This is.....kind of clumsy? "

The straightforward stage setting, the ostentatious gap - what will happen there from now on, Yukari was more uneasy about that rather than the fact that she would definitely be spotted since she couldn't recognize such an overt abnormality.

It would still be alright if her cognizant ability was disturbed because she used some hallucinogen but the magic stuff couldn't be helped.

But, there's no point in trying to run from here. First of all she should confirm the escape route and then wait for further development.

Suddenly, something abnormal happened.

Everyone was gazing steadily the ashen wall. The texture of the cold, hard concrete undulated as if embarrassed by those ardent eyes, flickered and started twisting.

The irregular wave gradually changed to concentric ripples with a diameter of a little over two meters.

And then -

The entrance went through the undulating concrete and he - appeared.

A magician. He was looking exactly like a magician from the fairy tales.

His whole body was wrapped in a black robe. Because the robe was covering most of him, his face wasn't visible. Particularly thorough, he was even holding a curved staff made of wood in his hand.

That appearance was seen by everyone in this place. Even the person most separated from the stage could see without interruption as the robed figure's entire body was filling the field of vision.

Because, the <<Magician>> was floating in midair. As if there was an invisible foothold, it was very safe and firm.

A wordless commotion leaked out from the mouth of the seeds.

In contrast to them, frequently manipulating unusual powers, that exceedingly simple power seemed easy enough to handle. But they didn't have the power to levitate or spring through the wall.

The existence who could easily exercise the mysterious power they don't have but even if they did they couldn't possibly use - the awe and fear regarding that man of absolute strength, and then becoming self conscious of it and gazing at him with secondhand hostility, the <<Seeds>> were scowling at the <<Magician>>

The black robe calmly caught that gaze. The swelling thirst for blood was electrifying the space.

But, in contrast with that -

"Waah - waah - waah - "

Absolutely dumbfounded Yukari was looking at the girl standing still behind the <<Magician>>.

In an inflammatory bondage look, she was even carrying a huge halberd. Her outward appearance was standing out but because she lacked vitality just like a doll, she didn't receive attention.

Yukari knew well that girl just like her folding herself back from the <<Magician>>'s overwhelming presence scattering around.

As the close friend of both Yukari and Ayano, the girl whose whereabouts were completely unknown after being kidnapped by Utsumi.

"Na- Nanase-chan....."

It was Kudou Nanase.

But she couldn't be filled with happiness for finding her. Nanase clearly lost her consciousness.

The brilliance of will and life that made her who she was couldn't be felt.

Although she was before her eyes, it resembled the empty shell of Kudou Nanase. Her body trembling with resentment for having her friend looked down upon, Yukari glared at the magician in black robes.

"That means - he must be Utsumi-kun?"

Adding the fact that Nanase was accompanying him, the possibility was extremely high.

When she tried to peek inside, looking closely at the center of the robe, as expected, she cannot see his face.

The moment she thought she should approach a little more, bravely defying the danger, the <<Magician>> lightly pushed out his staff. Only by doing that, the room full of commotion suddenly fell silent.

Looking at reality, an extremely powerful clout was controlling this space.

"Chosen ones"

The <<Magician>>'s voice tore the silence. That voice that was by no means grand, resounded clearly to the nooks and corners of the room.

"You did good responding to the call. I thank you in place of Bernhard, the lord of Pandemonium. "

Naturally, those words stated he was Pandemonium's proxy. The <<Seeds>> let out a murmur of surprise.

"My name is <<Grand Mage>>. I am a gifted person just like you. But - I am <<Fourth Class>>"

"Whaaat!?"

Here and there, shouts of shock erupted. That was understandable. Whose gathered at that place - meaning the <<Seeds>> confirmed until now, were <<First Class>> and <<Second Class>>. The <<Third Class>> was the stuff of rumors. The <<Fourth Class>> was similar to a wild idea.

No, it had been similar. Until now.

"Im- impossible!"

From somewhere a shout of objection was raised.

"We haven't even heard rumors about the existence of someone like you! Without anyone knowing, it's impossible to save enough XP for the <<Third Class>> itself - "

"....."

The <<Grand Mage>>'s small shoulder shook.

Hidden by the hood, his face couldn't be seen. But, it was obvious for everyone looking. That the <<Grand Mage>> was sneering.

"Bastard....."

"For those like you, not blessed with talent, accustoming your bodies through fights may be necessary. But, I am different. "

Unnaturally ignoring the exasperated man, the <<Grand Mage>> talked in a voice full of superiority.

"Besides, XP is nothing else but the work of accommodating power in the bodies of those without accomplishments. The thing called magical power and the assimilation of it for those powerless must be finely tuned in time over and over. "

Casually informed of the mechanism behind the level up that no one knew before, the <<Seeds>> were rendered speechless.

That detailed knowledge - by far more profound than that of <<Seeds>> - was the best evidence the <<Grand Mage>> was at the center of this series of events, at the center of Pandemonium.

"But, I am different. I, who held the greatest ability since the beginning, could receive a great amount of power without any kind of adjustment and was able to manipulate it.

Do you understand? For those truly great, there's no need for great effort. They will obtain what they desire just like that - precisely because that is allowed, they are being called prodigies. "

"...........!!"

The faces of the <<Seeds>> became stiff at the tremendously prideful words. And then, several quick-tempered people, threw themselves upon the <<Grand Mage>> still levitating in the air.

"Do you think we'll listen to this....."

"Don't be so cocky.....!"

No matter what sort of power they had, they didn't understand. Just before touching him, a spherical field sparkled around the <<Grand Mage>> and repelled the attackers.

"There's an everlasting barrier around my surroundings. It's impossible for the offensive abilities of <<Second Class>> to pierce through. "

"..............."

The <<Seeds>> - especially those who wanted to continuously attack the <<Grand Mage>> with bloody faces received the next attack back.

It wasn't only that the attack was defended against but that they received an unusual amount of damage. Those sorry states convulsing in fear were close to the agony of death.

"So, I'll impart the words of Bernhard, the lord of Pandemonium. "

The <<Grand Mage>> changed the topic as if nothing happened.

Understanding that was the main issue of this meeting, everyone listened closely.

"Three days from now on - "

In the silent hall, the voice of an oracle clearly reverberated.

"Seventy two hours from now on, Pandemonium will descend on the physical world. The location is Shinjuku Central Park."

As if giving the audience time to understand, the <<Grand Mage>> interrupted his words.

He took a large breath, and then continued.

"To celebrate the descent, you will be granted a present. Those who desire power, should head for Pandemonium. The one who arrives first, will receive my ultimate power. One no one will be able to go against. An absolutely unrivaled power. "

When the <<Grand Mage>> shut his mouth, the hall was packed with commotion.

An ultimate power. One no one will be able to go against. An absolutely unrivaled power.

- they wanted it.

At the same time, everyone thought so. They desired it. They desired it no matter what. But, to do so -

"........."

"..........."

Dangerous gazes were exchanged everywhere. The race already started. Remove the obstacles was obviously the fastest way.

But - at the same time, they noticed. The existence of the biggest obstacle.

Everyone's eyes flooded with conspiring, made the <<Grand Mage>>'s body tremble. He laughed.

"That's right, I'm the one who'll win"

As if talking about a definite result, he declared.

"By kicking you all to the side, I'll reach Pandemonium first. And then, I'll receive even more power, and reach the <<Fifth Class>>"

" .....!!"

"But there is also a chance for you. If you could defeat me, there's no doubt that person will become the strongest. I won't stop you if you want to run. "

Finishing with those affected words, he shrugged his shoulders underneath the robe. At the plain provocation, the killing intent voltage rapidly jumped up.

Ignoring the piercing killing intent the <<Grand Mage>> declared.

"Only those sincerely desiring power should come. Of course, you're free to do what you want in the meantime. Pandemonium doesn't try to restrict you in any way. I'm looking forward to the time I'll fight with you. "

"....."

Holding her breath, calmly, extremely calmly, Yukari caught the <<Grand Mage>>'s words.

Fumbling and confirming the IC recorder she grasped tightly inside her pocket was indeed recording, she took a light breath.

This seemed like the last directive from Pandemonium. Staying here any longer had no purpose.

She was worried about Nanase but she couldn't help her by herself. Deciding it was time to go, she looked once more at the <<Grand Mage>>.

"------tch!"

Their eyes met directly. Inside the hood, his lips were curving - she didn't know why but she clearly knew it.

"Baaad....."

The moment she sensed she was recognized, Yukari turned around and began to run.

She should have run and escaped calmly in such a way as to not attract attention but the situation was already developing beyond that.

Thrusting away those who stood in her way and pushing them aside, without caring about the public notice she ran like a startled hare.

Running up the stairs, she left the building. No one seemed to pursue her but she couldn't relax just yet.

She must quickly hide herself - whipping her body enough to breath hard, Yukari kicked the asphalt.

- and, a few minutes after.

Yukari took refuge in an inhabited room from another building. Because she was panicking, she neglected tracking her current position and couldn't identify even the buildings' name.

From the start, Yukari's strong point was intelligence gathering, but being a spy was outside her area of expertise.

She didn't know how to successfully escape while being chased, besides she had no way of fighting a magic user.

She did prepared a weapon for self defense but she had no confidence she could use it.

"Hmmm, it was too rash, huh? "

For the sake of saving Nanase, for the sake of helping Ayano, she tried to sneak in knowing it was dangerous, but, as expected, it was too impertinent.

If she were to get caught, she'll also become an encumbrance to Ayano.

".....Whatever. First of all, I must notify Ayano-chan - "

Instantly shaking off the feeling of shame, Yukari took out her phone.

She was only half-convinced before she heard his voice but she finally had definite proof.

The <<Grand Mage>> was Utsumi. She must tell that to Ayano no matter what.

She clapped the key with so much speed it left an after-print. She sent mail after mail.

- That activity continued intermittently for several minutes.

Part 3

Since the morning the case first started in, today too, Kirika got through the Kannagi Gate on her practically daily visit.

Her work finally reached a point where she could pause and only by remembering for how many days she only took naps, the look of fatigue was engraved deeper on Kirika's face.

But Ayano's complexion,even compared to that, could hardly be called sunny.

" ---------What happened? "

Kirika bluntly asked Ayano, standing near the entrance door next to the two Deva Kings caring thunder clouds.

Normally at such times she would act amiably as if trying to soothe Ayano but she was obviously not that flexible today.

"....."

In silence, Ayano pushed out her telephone. If her memory served her correctly in spite of drowsiness and fatigue, it was supposed to be her own.

"---------? "

Ayano frankly informed the puzzled Kirika.

"Mail"

"Is it all right to look? "

Instead of an answer, just a nod. Judging the silence as a positive answer, Kirika opened the email folder with a practiced hand.

"By the way....."

With a dry voice, Ayano asked Kirika fiddling with the telephone.

"Did you know all <<Seeds>> were summoned by Pandemonium yesterday? "

"----------!? No."

The hand pressing keys stopped, and Kirika flipped up with a face full of surprise.

Ayano waived her bangs in open despair.

"Why couldn't you lot notice something even a mere high school girl could? "

".....I can't answer that"

The origin of that information, and the guess of who the mail originator was, it was all in the log.

As feared, mails from Yukari were lining up. She read the first.

'"Descent of Pandemonium in the Shinjuku Central Park three days from now on. The ultimate power people will finally arrived at. "'

".....that was rash"

"Isn't it because the Police can't be relied on? "

Responding at those harsh words with a bitter smile, she read the next.

'"Utsumi. <<Grand Mage>>. <<Fourth Class>>. The emissary from Pandemonium. "

"Shit....."

'"Nanase-chan is sexy....."'

".....what?"

Kirika was amazed at the suddenly queer content. As she was already reading it, she wondered if she understood what was so surprising.

Ayano explained in a worn-out voice.

"It means Nanase is close to Utsumi. Dressed in some filth he liked so much. "

".....Aah, I see....."

Not finding any other appropriate comments, she made agreeable comments absentmindedly. The next mail.

The literary style was suddenly different.

'"Right now I am in one room of some desolated, unknown building. The <<Grand Mage>> Utsumi noticed me. He is definitely chasing me, right? "'

".....this is?"

"You'll know once you read"

Coldly, Ayano refused any explanation. Rather than sorrow, that face showed a different emotion -

'"It's impossible for the mighty magical power of the <<Grand Mage>> to miss me. It's terrifying. My heart is frozen by the sound of a running mouse"'

"……Hey, just wait……."

"……."

When she raised her face, Ayano turned hers away. An obstinate silence.

'"I hear a voice. The <<Grand Mage>> is calling my name. He's getting closer. Perhaps, he already found me. That devilish man is only doing this to scare me"'

Next.

'"The sound of footsteps reverberates. Gan, gan, he's intentionally loud. He's drawing near. He's here - In what a terrifying thing I involved myself. Dear god!"'

Next.

'"Aaah - I'm already broken. Someone, if you're reading this mail, tell my pet, Ball. That I was foolish. I was the one at fault for not accepting his advice. The footsteps stopped. Instead the sound of the revolving knock can be heard. Knock-knock, knock-knock. Aah, he's there. He is on the other side of the door. He's opening the door. A ghastly creak is raised, slowly. From the gap of the opening door, a pale, bony hand stretches - Aaaah, aaaaaahhhh!!"'

That was the last.

After looking at the phone screed dumbfounded for a while, Kirika asked the sullen Ayano.

"Errrrr, so - Shinomiya-san? "

"……Didn't return to her home"

If that is true - rather than an exaggeration, this mail is true. Exchanged for precious information, it means that one of Ayano's friends was captured yet again.

"How to say it, she's a terrible child"

In a lot of ways.

Probably reading between those lines, Ayano silently flipped out.

Tearing off the phone from Kirika's hands, she threw it into the ground with all her strength.

"Are you the protagonist of some novel from a hundred years ago!? Who the fuck is Ball!? If you have time to write *Aaaah, aaaaaahhhh!!* hurry and run away!!"

"No, well, wasn't it because she didn't think she could run away? Besides, she wanted to at least send the information before getting caught, no? "

Kirika tried to somehow cover for her but -

"Even that clumsy mystery novel!? "

"…….that's…….well……."

As one would expect, she couldn't defend that.

"But, being able to confirm Nanase-san's survival is a small mercy. That's why, I'm sure even Shinomiya-san - "

"It's not only about being alive, right? She's a woman, you know!? "

Unable to find peace in Kirika's words, Ayano repelled them with unconcealed wrath. Kirika also felt the same.

"........I apologizes"

"It's not like I blame you or anything. About Yukari, the responsibility is all hers. She was supposed to know it would be dangerous. "

Finally calming down after all the shouting, this time Ayano covered for Kirika.

"The problem is, what do do next? "

".....that's true"

Even more apologetic, Kirika's voice became smaller.

"To say it frankly, the possibility of us finding Pandemonium in the next two days is close to zero. I think we can only try to be perfectly ready for when it descends. "

"....."

"I'm sorry. If at least Kazuma would be here"

They both understood that was a meaningless assumption.

Ayano ignored those words as if she didn't even heard them and glared at the wall as if it was her mortal enemy.

"Yukari, Nanase.....please be well....."

A frail murmur escaped.

Part 4

Leaping through space, the <<Grand Mage>> Utsumi, made an appearance in Pandemonium's lobby. Behind him, Nanase and Yukari, restrained by Nanase, followed.

"Nanase-chan, it hurts - Be a little more gentle - "

Her wrists grasped with enough force to make her bones creak, Yukari cried and begged for mercy. But, Nanase didn't have the slightest reaction. Obviously, the force wasn't loosened.

"It's useless. Nanase only listens to my commands. ", declared Utsumi boastful.

Hearing that, Yukari demanded in a friendly tone.

"Then please order her, Utsumi-kun. "

"I am <<Grand Mage>>. I cast away my ordinary name. "

"Ordinary? Did Utsumi-kun became a priest? "

With a smiling face without the slightest ill-will, Yukari asked innocently.

Utsumi's body trembled and after a few seconds, he turned his back on them and walked out without saying anything. Without being ordered, Nanase followed him.

Obviously, since she was caught by Nanase, so did Yukari.

"Where are you going - ?"

Without reply Utsumi strutted in the big mansion as if he owned the place.

Without knocking, he opened three sets of doors and finally Yukari met the master of the mansion.

A tall man cloaked in a red mantle, a simple mask was covering his face.

For Yukari the background of the man impeccably dressed, as if he expected visitors was very clear.

Bowing her head, she smiled sweetly.

"Good evening, you're Bernhardt-san I suppose. I apologize for the sudden visit - "

"Don't worry about it. Visitors are always welcome. You can think of it as your own house. "

With a composed attitude, the master of Pandemonium bowed his head. The atmosphere friendly on the surface was rotating slowly in the space between the two.

"By the way, my name is Vesalius. It may be a bit difficult to remember by the Japanese but I'd rather you addressed me correctly. "

"Aah, this cannot be, I'm sorry for making a mistake"

"No, you're not to blame. Please don't take offense. "

"I understand. Confusing your name with someone else's was very impolite"

Even a normal human would understand this atmosphere packed with tension behind the smiling faces.

But what was there was a doll who lost her will and a thickheaded or rather thick skinned baka pretending to be important.

Irritated by what he perceived as a gentle atmosphere, Utsumi forced his way through those two.

"This is no guest, she's my prisoner! This woman became a police spy and tried to get her hands on information about Pandemonium!"

" -----Hou?"

Including light reprimand in his gaze, Bernhardt stared at Yukari. Yukari stuck out her tongue in mischief and lightly knocked her head.

"Ehe he he - I'm sorry"

"Geez, what a troublesome Ojou-san"

".....only that? "

Seeing Bernhardt who was about to overlook Yukari's deed with a wry smile, Utsumi asked in a sharp voice.

Bernhardt answered as a matter of course.

"It doesn't matter whether she found out something or not. The fact that the Police will intervene in the ceremony has already been factored in. There is no uncertainty. "

" - What if they find this place before the ceremony? "

"They won't"

A definite statement.

"I know the Special Information Storage Room's war potential. Even if this woman were to have a transmission instrument and send this specific coordinates, entrance is impossible."

"Hee.....what incredible self-confidence"

"It's not self-confidence but the statement of mere facts. Apart from that - did you send the message? "

With an arrogant attitude, Utsumi nodded when asked by Bernhardt about the right and wrongs of being an errand boy.

"Aah, I told them. Almost everyone was gathered. But, why must we be so roundabout about it? Wouldn't it have been easier just to send an order? "

"Leading people brings various troubles and uncertainties. It's more efficient to let them be independent. "

"Independence! Independence? That's rich - "

As if he heard some very funny story, Utsumi abruptly burst in a roar of laughter.

"Ha ha ha! Aha ha ha ha! Bua ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha !!"

Bernhardt was looking indifferently at Utsumi, rolling about with laughter monstrously rather than lively, like he was one part of the landscape.

"Aah, don't worry about it. He sometimes gets like this. "

"Ha.....haa....."

Yukari vaguely nodded, overcome with surprise.

Not hearing that exchange, Utsumi continued to laugh endlessly.

The line of sight of that expressionless doll looked like that of a researcher observing an experimental animal.

But, immediately following,

"Oh, by the way, is the preparation over?"

As if someone pressed his switch, Utsumi returned to a normal state.

From frenzy to serenity - a bizarre change of attitude without any kind of midway passage.

Bernhardt faced that extremely calmly.

"Yes, it just became so"

"In other words, your duty is already over."

" - Hmm"

From inside the mask, the indication of a thin smile floated.

The words of rebellion impossible to misunderstand, the thirst to kill received by his body made the master of Pandemonium breathe hard.

"Will you challenge me with the power I gave you, boy? "

"The pupil is supposed to overcome his teacher sooner or later. "

Yet again, with an attitude full of self-confidence and composure Utsumi strikes again.

Not one willing to step aside, their glints in the eyes gave off sparks.

"I will obtain everything! No one is able to oppose me!"

Drunken with power, the boy changed his words to shouts.

That was the signal of the starting battle.

Chapter 5 - Suppression
Part 1

By the time Ayano's group appeared, the fight already started.

Flying about lightning, roaring explosions, echoing screams and shouts changed the place were Pandemonium primised to descend, the Shinjuku Central Park, to a hellish picture of agonizing cries.

" - they're being really gaudy, huh? "

Kirika replied in an irresponsible tone to Ayano who murmured so in amazement.

"Yeah. After all, it seems like most of the members are participating. "

In the end, the two days passed without any kind of progress.

Not finding Pandemonium or getting hold of where Kazuma was, Ayano's group arrived to this day when Pandemonium will descent.

As the messenger of Pandemonium, the <<Grand Mage>> Utsumi Kousuke once announced all <<Seeds>>, the first one to reach Pandemonium after it showed itself, would be given an ultimate power.

It this was nothing else but a simple battle royale, the number of people giving up would be pretty big.

In front of the almost overwhelming power of the self-styled <<Fourth Class>> Utsumi, it seemed impossible to win even when forming a group.

But, the condition of winning this game was *to reach Pandemonium first*.

Of course, there are some advantages to a simple race but there still wasn't a direct connection between combat abilities and the outcome of the battle.

Even if defeating the <<Grand Mage>> was impossible he can still be circumvented.

All the <<Seeds>> smoothly thought so. And then, deliberately to acquire *the ultimate power*.

As a result, without missing one, they all gathered here. And they the fight began without waiting for Pandemonium to appear.

For the sake of defeating at least one rival as fast as possible.

"So, should we do something about it? "

"Does it look like you can do something about it? "

Looking at the number of <<Seeds>> decreasing by the hour, Ayano and Kirika talked together in indifferent tones.

"Wasn't your lot enough to deal with this degree of power? "

"If they were by themselves"

Behind Kirika shrugging her shoulders, there are five subordinate Jutsushi.

Comparing it to the <<Seeds>>, although in the process of rapid decrease, there were still dozens of them.

No matter how much excellent the Jutsushi were when individually compared, it was still impossible to turn ten times fold enemies powerless without killing them.

"If you let me speak frankly, the current situation is warmly welcomed. The opponents are crushing themselves on their own accord. "

"But I think the police exists only to protect the citizens"

"That depends on the situation. There's no need exhausting our war potential for the sake of protecting the human rights of some criminal", declared Kirika cool-headed.

She won't use her power to save those who can easily hurt another without ever looking back because the law cannot judge them, even if they are nothing more but Bernhardt's or Pandemonium's pieces.

"If Genma-dono would have helped us out, he would have been able to purify all <<Seeds>> in one go. "

"Aah - , no, it's not going to happen"

Ayano carelessly waved her hand at Kirika who looked at her as if investigating.

"That highly esteemed Uncle of mine has no reason to help these idiots who act violently on power borrowed from Youma. If Ojii-sama were to be right here, he would turn to ashes all these idiots *and* Pandemonium *and* the park, you know"

"Aah, that sounds good"

As if anticipating the gruesome future Ayano talked about, Kirika agreed to it calmly.

"But, why won't Genma-dono come? The enemy is Bernhardt Rhodes. Even if you are the Kannagi Clan, he's not an existence you should ignore. "

"Aah - yeah....."

With a vague a nod, Ayano and Ren exchanged a complicated glance.

"Because Oji-sama is a Kannagi Jutsushi to the core, right......."

"- I don't understand"

"Well, I think it's because he believes in me and Ren so he entrusted this to us..."

Unable to say the truth, Ayano falsified a suitable answer.

"I'm entrusting this matter to you"

The evening before the descent of Pandemonium, Genma told so to Ayano and Ren.

Naturally the two asked back, unable to agree.

"Can you tell us the reason? "

The opponent is the world's highest Majutsushi. No matter how much war potential one had, he is worrisome.

Since Tokyo's spiritual protection is the duty of Kannagi and Bernhardt's deed disturbed that, Genma's participation in the battle was inevitable, his obligation.

It wasn't something that could be overlooked because of private matters.

But, without alluding to that reason, Genma continued.

"Tomorrow, it seems Kazuma will also appear at Pandemonium."

"……it seems so"

"He already became an existence harmful to the Kannagi."

Genma's words were not incorrect.

Beside the <<Seeds>>, Kazuma's violence reached even a Special Information Storage Room Jutsushi, largely deviating from the permissible bounds.

And, although without his intention, Kazuma was even now registered with the Kannagi family name. It wasn't something they could neglect.

"We have no choice but to destroy him."

"--------!!"

That frozen declaration and the violent pressure accompanying it hit Ayano and Ren very hard.

With a start, Ayano's body shook - Ren looked at his Father with eyes full of determination.

"I will - We will persuade him!"

"Not necessary"

"But!"

"Not necessary"

Genma's voice was steady without any gaps. The accelerated growth of that power and heavy pressure that could crush a heart made Ayano curl herself up without ever raising her face.

But even so, the pressure wasn't lifted.

Wondering about it, she examined Ren's situation with a sidelong glance - with his face still raised up he caught Genma's gaze head-on.

The pressure increased again. It's purpose already migrated from coercing to opponent to downright crush him to death, the feeling of oppression was so high it made then think about the danger their lives were in.

"Won't you listen to what I say? "

"I.....won't..!"

With a hoarse but definite voice, Ren assessed his rebellion towards Genma. His forehead was full of sweat and although his grasped fists were shaking on top of his knees, the gaze he fixed on his father's eyes didn't waver for one moment.

"Ren - when did you become so strong...?"

In a daze that went beyond surprise, Ayano fixed her eyes on Ren's gallant figure.

Even though until now he always followed her around, a pampered child, a scared cat -

While Ayano wasn't quite present, the father and child exchanged arguments in a sharp tone.

"Beyond the fact he was born from the Head of the Kannagi Family, I cannot tolerate him to be swayed by emotions! Even if he's blood relative - no, exactly because he is, his error won't be tolerated!"

"If he dies.....if he dies he won't be able to atone! If he committed a sin, he should live all the more...isn't he supposed to redeem his faults!? "

While looking at those two, continuing to argue, Ayano suddenly felt doubt.

While insisting on Kazuma's conviction, the fact that he won't participate in the battle doesn't add up.

Not even Genma would think of trying to make her and Ren kill Kazuma by themselves.

Then, why?

Thinking about it, Genma's attitude was dubious since the beginning. He was more oppressive than necessary, his opinion resembling stubbornness.

As if he was stirring up animosity on purpose.

Ayano suddenly remembered something Juugo said long ago.

Genma disinherited Kazuma because the Kannagi Clan was a cage and if he couldn't escape from that cage by himself, he set Kazuma free.

"Then, this is - "

If he were to intervene, he will definitely have to kill Kazuma according to the Kannagi mission. And, as he wasn't able to instruct them contrary to the mission, that's why -

At the same time Ayano reached that conclusion, Genma and Ren's argument was about to close.

"I won't give up on anything! I'll persuade Nii-sama, I'll kill Bernhardt and I'll destroy Pandemonium, I'll show you!"

"Just try and see if you can, brat!"

Several times the volume of Ren's shout, Genma roared in a very loud voice that was just like a lion's roar.

But immediately following, he noticed Ayano's gaze staring at him in a daze.

Guessing something from her eyes, Genma expressed a small wry smile and faced Ayano with a serene attitude that made his fury so far hard to believe.

"Ayano"

"Ye.....yes..."

"Please take care of it"

".....!!"

Understanding her conjecture was right on the money, Ayano's face had a cramp.

"Every last one of them - "

It's not like she didn't understand his feelings but she couldn't help but think so.

"Why are you trying to force it on me!? I'll do it myself, by myself!"

".....I see"

Keeping a faint bitterness in her voice, Kirika bowed her head in assent.

She couldn't possibly comprehend Ayano's words but it was also true nothing would come out of voicing her complaints.

It doesn't matter how it's said, what's not there it's not there.

Quickly throwing away the pointless hope, there's no way but to effectively use the hand she was dealt.

"If it's like that you must preserve your power. If Pandemonium and Kazuma will appear, the situation will change, right?"

"......yeah"

"Do you anticipate it?"

"..........."

Ayano became silent and couldn't respond to Kirika's gaze without banter, loaded with serious expectations.

Honestly, her heart wasn't decided yet.

About holding Kazuma back. About blocking that man's way.

Even understating it, it was reckless action. It was like bungee jumping without a rope.

It wasn't something that could be solved by courage and effort.

No matter how she would struggle, she would certainly die - if Kazuma were to become serious.

"Nee-sama"

As if holding on to the heart of his hesitating sister, Ren grabbed Ayano's hands. His eyes already lost all their indecision.

"It will be fine. I'm sure."

"...........well, *you* will be fine for sure", grumbled Ayano, past the time to give up.

But the situation didn't give her spare time to waver.

"It's coming", murmured Kirika giving up.

Several of the <<Seeds>> also noticed it and were running up to them with bloodshot eyes. They were aiming at getting on Pandemonium first but it wasn't unreasonable to think they will aim at them, standing still close to the park.

At this point expecting sense from them was a waste of time.

"I'll go"

Anticipating the party, Ren stepped forward.

Certainly, having Ren face the sacrifices possessed by the devil manipulating purification flames that destroyed nothing but that nature was appropriate. But -

"Wouldn't it be better for you to preserve your power? "

Using up his power before the crucial will come to nothing.

Ren stared head-on at Ayano who thought so.

"Then, are we going to let them die without helping? Because in front of something bigger a few sacrifices can't be helped? "

"That's - "

Overpowered by that earnest gaze, Ayano instinctively caught her breath.

"Even so, I'll do it. If I have a bigger power in comparison to humans, I want to protect everything with that power. I don't care if it's pride or self-righteousness. I decided to live that way. "

Declaring so without hesitation, Ren started running without waiting for a reply.

Compared with the big frames assaulting him, his body was very small.

But the brightness of that golden flame surging from his body utterly defeated the approaching <<Seeds>> in one blow.

It had no connection with level, class and so forth. That overwhelming power at totally different level exorcised and burned the devilishness without leaving any trace, moreover by delicately adjusting the after-effect, it stunned the hosts.

So, the bodies of the boys that lost consciousness were evacuated by Kirika's subordinates in the vicinity of the park.

"This is so easy"

"Isn't it by relying on civilians, public servant? "

"It's the right person in the right place. Besides - "

Taking Ayano's criticism in one stride, Kirika bragged. But, suddenly revising her attitude, she looked at Ayano.

"So, how long will you stand still?"

"....."

Without reply Ayano feebly cast her eyes down.

"Well, leaving that aside"

As if nothing happened, Kirika changed her line of sight from Ayano to the watch.

"I think Ren-kun's determination is noble but won't you wait another minute?"

"One more minute?"

Ren too looked at his watch. The time right now is 11:59 P.M.

"What happens at midnight? "

"Pandemonium will emerge"

Ayano and Ren became speechless at that sleek announcement.

"Wh- wait, when did you find such a specific moment? "

"I didn't know or anything but isn't that a general guess? There's not another more appropriate time for something belonging to the spirit world to appear in this one, no? "

"....."

"Midnight represents the threshold between yesterday and today. And the threshold between today and tomorrow. It is yesterday, today and tomorrow. The only moment when the time's absolute laws become ambiguous. Therefore the boundaries between the spirit world and this world also become ambiguous and various apparitions erode the reality - "

Finishing her song-like narration, Kirika completely changed and continued in a pragmatic tone.

"Well, it can only be that time besides Majutsushi are endlessly fussing over about agreeing with that consistency. "

"I see, then we'll wait. It will be here before long anyway. "

Agreeing to Kirika's words, Ayano nodded.

How will the situation change in response to Pandemonium's arrival - she was thinking it won't be late to start moving after seeing that.

And after ten more seconds passed, *the time of threshold* arrived.

The time that is and isn't where anything can happen.

Soundless, the space shook.

After a pause of one moment, this time the ground shook, involved in a physical shock. That vibration, definitely not an earthquake, was as if a huge mass was suddenly dropped on the ground -

" - tch, aren't you doing whatever you like? "

Cursing inside her chest, Ayano shifted her focus on the direction the abnormality seemed to originate from.

That was inside an enshrouding cloud of dust. As if it continued being there without chance for a hundred years, grave, firmly.

Even though it was far, she understood it quickly - it was an antique looking shape. Declined like a dilapidated house and yet despite of that it had a decadent presence filled with dark hot air.

Just about everything was as before, the fact that it was destroyed together with the Tokyo Government Office was nothing but a dream, and Pandemonium was reigning there with its overwhelming presence.

"It's pretty far, huh? Exactly right in the center of the park? ", murmured Kirika, without showing any kind of surprise at the sudden state of urgency.

Even Ayano, similarly used to the lack of common sense, replied very calm.

"That's about right, but I won't know for sure before I get a little bit closer."

Perceiving that the power of <<Seeds>> was rapidly growing, Ayano strengthened her vigilance. Surveying the scene, the fray without rules or any kind of sense was completely interrupted.

The <<Seeds>> stood rock still as if their souls had been unplugged. Contrary to that atmosphere, the power was rising continuously.

Some worthless thing is about to happen again - Ayano believed so.

"Uuu.....uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu....."

Suddenly, one of the <<Seeds>> let out a moan. He hugged his body closely as if he was enduring something, and squat.

"Uuguuuuu.....Uruuuuraaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!"

A frail moan. But, that gradually changed to a scream. His face looking downward turned to the night sky, and the man shriek as if tearing his throat.

And then, a rapid variation was produced.

The man's flesh started to expand, his clothes torn off from the inside. The surface of his exposed body was covered in too much muscle than it was humanly possible, wrapping him up.

At last his head, accomplished a transformation from his skeletal structure that seemed to have ended for the present.

From the gap of his largely split mouth, sharp fangs showed and the man - howled at the moon.

"WOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOONNN--"

Knitting her brows Ayano watched how both his heart and body degenerated equally to that of a beast.

"Lycantrophy ----?"

"It's not something that cute.", answered Kirika looking at the surroundings.

Following that gaze, Ayano grimaced.

".....wah"

That grotesque transformation affected the majority of the <<Seeds>>.

In one case, only one part of a man's body turned while the rest remained human, another completely deviated from the human form.

In the end just like slimes of fog, they were reduced to beings unable to maintain a fixed shape.

"Ugh, is this possibly - "

"They woke up maybe? "

The real seeds living as parasites in the bodies of <<Seeds>> were Youma in a dormant state.

"In comparison with the same raw materials there is plenty of variation in their outward appearance - I think there's a discrepancy in the growth process and the host they fed on."

"This is not the place to leisurely express your reasoning, no? "

"Huh, there's nothing we can do except for this. "

Kirika replied without shyness to Ayano's retort.

"……that may be so"

There is a wide difference in ability between the human who uses the Youma's power and the one that completely became a Youma. Even if it's a low class one, the Jutsushi with low combat abilities from the Special Information Storage Room will find it a heavy burden.

"Aah, they're moving"

As Ren called Ayano to attention, they shifted they focus on the Youma.

The group of Youma that ate their hosts to exhaustion moved for the first time. Without exception, they headed for Pandemonium.

Those few <<Seeds>> that retained their awareness indomitably shuffled their feet.

A violent race began.

It was like a group of ogres competing for food. Those being in the vanguard pulled and killed each other in a combined effort, those following stepped on them and changed them to rags and if two were at the same distance they skinned each other with they fangs, not allowing the others to move forward.

Ayano's group stood rock still and silent faced with the battle several times more bloody that before.

"Eeh……, this is…."

After several seconds - completely pulling herself together, Ayano muttered to herself.

"Are they being called? "

"Or there's still a small portion of the host's consciousness - at any rate, we should stop them from reaching Pandemonium. Nothing good would come out of it."

"I agree"

Just as they were about to run after exchanging a short agreement, at that time -

Suddenly, the atmosphere changed.

The dry wind hurts the skin.

That thoroughly, thoroughly overwhelming force and the air full of killing intent spread out over the entire park like a mantle.

"What now -!?"

Bernhardt started something else - Ayano immediately thought so.

But, Kirika looked at the sky with a serious face and groaned disgusted.

"You came, huh - Kazuma"

"Kazuma!? This!?"

"Who else it there? ", declared Kirika matter of fact to Ayano, who opened her eyes wide with unconcealed fright.

"A man who rules the atmosphere so overwhelmingly - there's no one else but him, right? "

"B- but……but……."

Pressuring her body - no, the entire surrounding airspace, that oppressive intent felt only ominous.

The urge to attack was making her body feel on the edge, as if it was about to be cut down.

Similar to the release of a pack of starving wolfs, that Kehai was showing its dazzling lust.

Is this - is *this* - is this Kazuma's power?

"You're lying.....it cannot, be like this....."

"I believe I told you to forget about the Kazuma you knew."

She remembered about two years before.

The avatar of a storm spreading death and destruction.

Prepared to destroy the entire world for the sake of revenge, for the sake of killing one person, that man was equivalent with a living disaster.

"This is also Kazuma. No, maybe only this is Kazuma. "

".....let's go", Ren asked the dazed Ayano in front of Kirika trembling in fear.

That voice was carrying a fear that couldn't be concealed but nevertheless the determination to move forward doesn't shake.

"Detective Tachibana - ?"

"I apologize. From here on, it's impossible for us", determined Kirika controlling Ren's words.

"I'm sorry but beyond this point go just the two of you. We will fall back and spread a barrier around the park. Because of instinct or because they were ordered they're all heading to Pandemonium right now but if they were to meet *him* a few will probably run towards us."

"That's right. We're leaving it to you."

Ren agreed after thinking about it a little and urged Ayano once more.

"Let's go"

"Y- yeah...."

Maybe because she couldn't accept Kazuma's transformation yet, Ayano was hesitating with an indecisive attitude.

Seeing that, Kirika placed her hand on Ayano's shoulder as if trying to encourage her and smiled a little.

"Listen to me, Ayano-chan, I think you may be successful without having to think too much about it"

If she were told something like this in normal circumstances, Ayano's face would flush red in anger.

But, there was pretty much no reaction now. Without looking at Kirika, she answered in a murmur.

".....I'll put in my best effort"

".....go for it"

Understanding that she didn't manage to stir Ayano, eventually Kirika sent out the girl with a feeble smile.

Part 2

"........it turned up, huh?"

Due to the collapse of the Tokyo Government Office, overlooking the Central Park from the highest floor of the partially destroyed National Diet Building, Kazuma murmured.

Close to the center of the park, an old western style house instantly made an appearance.

A large quantity of Youki gathered and was in the process of going there but for him right now that is inconsequential.

That's right, everything else is not worth worrying about. There are just two important things.

To kill - that annoying Majutsushi.

To break - that disgusting doll imitating his beloved.

He won't let anything get in the way. He won't stop.

Because he took this power for the sake of revenge.

"Just wait, Bernhardt"

The moment he kicked the foothold and soared into the sky, Kazuma suddenly remembered.

That once, the same thing happened.

"Humph........"

Kazuma laughed at the repeating farce.

At that time, Kazuma challenged the Majutsushi for Tsoi Rin.

At that time, to rescue her. And this time, to kill.

The objective was reversed. But, the result will still be the same. Because right now, he has that much power.

Because right now, he has that much power enough to make the world obey his will, for the sake of fulfilling his objective.

"How regretful. How unsightly even if I say so myself"

But even so, he cannot help but think. Just like he thought thousands, tens of thousands before.

If he only had this power back then

"Stooooooooooop it!!"

Kazuma screamed at the top of his voice - or so he wanted but what came through his broken throat resembled a hoarse stridor not recognizable words.

The man didn't turn around.

He looked at him once at the beginning but then perfectly ignoring Kazuma's existence he performed the ceremony - and the he carried it out.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa"

Without asking for agreement, he showed Kazuma that sad sight. The whole story of stealing everything from the existence of the woman he loved.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa"

He couldn't do anything. Not rescuing her, not even delaying the ceremony by at least a second.

Not allowed anything, not accomplishing anything, he lost his most precious thing.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa"

His hands and feet were completely broken, he couldn't stand up. He could only let out hollow moans and shed tears from his eyes that were miraculously safe.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa"

Abruptly the weight disappeared from his back. Handling Kazuma like a baby, the familiar that mercilessly trampled him down, wanted to put his legs out of the way.

The familiar quickly backed off and went down on his knees respectfully. Of course, not in front of Kazuma. In front of its master that stepped in front of Kazuma.

Pointing hie eyeballs upward to the almost limit Kazuma looked up at the man. He no longer had the energy to move his neck.

"........Er...win....."

With a grazed voice he called the name of the enemy. The man - Erwin Leszaar looked down on Kazuma as if looking at a spot on the floor.

According to the legend, he was at the very least three hundred years old but no matter how you look at it those features were of a young man in his twenties.

Hid blond hair, blue eyes and white skin turned him to the very picture of a handsome man.

"I don't really understand but - ", Erwin asked Kazuma bending his head slightly in wonder.

"After all, why did you came here? "

"........!!"

He didn't make fun of him. That was a genuine question.

Understanding his do or die action was only recognized as a disturbance, Kazuma's body burned in humiliation.

"Thinking about it, even your situation is a little unclear. You can use some Jutsu but not enough to call yourself a Jutsushi. Aah, your <<Ki>> is nicely mature and well-rounded. It's a big deal considering how young you are! "

Without carrying about Kazuma's thoughts Erwin continued talking one-sided.

"But that's all. Are you a master of martial arts who can dabble just a little bit in Jutsu, are you some dropped out smatterer aiming to become a

Jutsushi - at any rate, in front of a real Majutsushi that degree of power is mere child's play.

You understand that much, right? "

"So what.....?"

Kazuma responded with a gaze loaded with an infinite number of curses.

"So, should I have abandoned her? Would it have been better to give up? "

"".....Tsoi.....Rin....."

He only said those two words. The name of the girl he wanted to protect but couldn't.

"Tsoi Rin? Aah, the name of the miss who became a sacrifice. Then you came here to rescue her - without considering your chances? "

As if giving praise to Kazuma's courage, a smile was etched into his lips. And then he completely changed -

"How foolish that was"

"....!!"

Kazuma's body trembled in fury. But, that body, already couldn't move even a finger.

If he could move for a second, only for a second, he will definitely bite that man's windpipe -

"At the expense of that girl, I received life. She did very well, that girl. However, your death, because you couldn't obstruct the ceremony, is really meaningless. A human should die in a more meaningful manner - don't you agree? "

"Fu....fuck, you....."

That was the greatest fury he felt so far. As if he had already died, it wasn't because his death would be in vain.

He self-consciously knew he was fatally wounded. Even assuming they'll leave him as it it without the final blow, he will die in a few hours anyway.

That was inconsequential. Because he had already lost the reason to stay alive.

"She did very well, huh? "

While stealing Tsoi Rin's life, the shamelessness of talking about her death as meaningful - he could never allow such a thing.

Kazuma knew the meaning of becoming a sacrifice to the devil.

That wasn't a mere corporeal death. It was the extinction of the soul, of the existence itself.

She will never be born again, the return to absolute nothingness.

The ultimate *end*.

Even when the last judgment will come, Tsoi Rin won't be saved.

".....damn...you....."

Spitting out a jeer weaker that a sigh, Kazuma glared at Erwin.

Why, did Tsoi Rin had to die?

For the selfish desire of this man.

Why. Why. Why.

"Well then"

Losing his interest towards Kazuma, Erwin left the room.

"Clean this up"

"…….Wait…..bastard……."

He reached out feebly - when he wanted to reach out he convulsed - Kazuma's right arm was crushed under the familiar's foot. Another long bone was broken.

"…….Gaaah….."

While spitting out blood froth together with that small shriek, Kazuma looked up at the familiar's appearance.

With features of both demon and beast, a lower grade devil whose ugly exterior inspired revulsion in those who looked at him.

Will he be killed by something like this?

Kazuma was wrapped in a sense of helplessness. He lost the girl he had to protect, he couldn't retaliate even once against the Majutsushi he should kill, and will die here without killing at least one of those pawns?

The familiar's mug changed to sneer. Those sharp claws that mangled Kazuma many times were pushed out for show.

"…….Will I…..die……?"

If those claws were to stab him, he will die this time. It wasn't a guess, he understood it was a definite fact.

He was supposed to have already lost his meaning to live. He was supposed not to mind even death.

But, even so - as expected, death is scary.

Without reason, he purely thought *I don't want to die*. And then -

Part 3

From Ren's mouth, a moan of unbearable fear leaked out.

Pandemonium appeared in the center of the park, as if trying to crush the Niagara waterfall.

The water plaza that was there, before the waterfall, spread out like Pandemonium's front garden.

And then - right there right now was looking like heaps of bodies and streams of blood.

Both humans and demons systemically torn to pieces evenly were lying down their contents scattered.

The head group of <<Seeds>> and <<Youma>> aiming at Pandemonium encountered *it* just before reaching their goal.

Exhausting the nourishment of the host, the Youma achieved a complete manifestation of their devilishness.

The demon power - regardless of orientation - governed the seeds with a strong will.

You could say that every one of them was a match for a thousand, existences that could manipulate a mighty power.

But -

"Aah……"

There was already no way of telling how many had they been. Even the distinction between the corpses of humans and demons disappeared.

In just one instant.

Everything was exterminated in a moment. By just one raging, wild Fujutsushi.

"Nii.....sama....."

Overawed by the overwhelming power, Ren could do nothing else but moan.

Ayano had already lost her voice.

At the center of that raging power, *he* was.

Stepping over the broken pieces of those corpses, his glare fixed on Pandemonium soaring before his eyes.

Yagami Kazuma - the avatar of death and destruction ruling the windstorm.

The surging wind, like an armor, like a blade, was circling around him.

Because of the tremendous frictional heat of the atmosphere vortex, electrical discharges were born everywhere in the sky and the wind tower stabbing at the sky was colored a dazzling white.

That was literally a thunder storm. The iron hammer of the atmosphere clad in lightning, that would burn and destroy everything it touches.

"Is this.....is this Nii-sama's true, power.....", murmured Ren to himself in a trembling voice.

But he realized the next moment that even that recognition was too naive.

That irrational power even under normal circumstances, was showed elevated even more.

The flickering white light was shining in the dark night, the endlessly amplificating ascending air current calling out thunder clouds overhead.

The vocal duet of rearing thunder both on heaven and earth resembled the howl of a demon beast.

"Ni.....Nii-sama!"

Without seeming to have heard Ren's voice Kazuma was looking straight at Pandemonium.

Probably not taking the time to especially search for Bernhardt, he was planning to blow away the whole Pandemonium.

Certainly, in front of this kind of abuse of power, no matter how huge or solid the mansion is, it was the same as a shack.

Without withstanding it for even a second, it will definitely vanish without leaving behind even ash.

But, Ren didn't want to see his brother like that. The Kazuma he admired would never do such a thing. And above all -

"Nii-sama, please stop! Even if you do that Tsoi Rin-san won't be pleased. "

As expected, unable to ignore Tsoi Rin's name, Kazuma showed a small but immediate reaction.

Securing that effect, Ren raised his voice even more.

"Please collect yourself! Even if you get your revenge, the dead won't come back! If Tsoi Rin-san could see Nii-sama right now, I'm sure she would be sad! That's why, that's why - "

"What the fuck are you saying? "

Turning around, Kazuma looked at Ren quizzical. That face was unexpectedly calm but didn't appear like he forgot about his anger.

"How can the dead be sad? "

"Eeh, b- but....."

"Didn't I tell you before. Death is the *end*."

Kazuma informed Ren, perplexed by the unexpected reaction, in a matter of fact.

"Those harboring dreams, those mad with hatred, those that loved others, when they die everything turns to nothing. Therefore, no matter what I do, the dead won't be delighted. They won't be sad. They don't feel - anything. "

"....nii,sama....."

"If you thought I want to kill Bernhardt because of Tsoi Rin, that's your mistake. I'll kill him because I want to kill him for myself. I'll kill those that want to get in my way. I'll kill those that get in my way. It's that simple. "

"But, Nii-sama - "

"Ren"

Kazuma interrupted coldly the appeal of his little brother, already without arguments but still wanting to stop him.

"Shut up already. Your words won't stop me"

"nii,sama....."

" - Will you get in my way, Ren? "

If you get in my way - with words very clear to understand without listening to the second part, Kazuma gave him a warning.

Ren had no words to defeat that.

"this is something - right?"

With a mood that it was someone else's problem, Ayano is watching attentively the back and forth argument between the two.

If she were to judge it objectively, she thought that Ren's defeat was a reasonable consequence.

To begin with, rather than an argument, it was closer to trying to get the other party agree with what you have to say.

The person who agreed on it's response from the beginning, the person with a solid resolution that will go forward to the very last even if he's wrong, for those kind of people the words of others have no meaning.

It's obvious that those words are spent in vain.

But even so.

Right now Ayano felt an uncommon discomfort towards Kazuma.

If Kazuma is that kind of man, if he can understand reason, in spite of agreeing with his feelings when she placed the figure of that man in her field of vision, she's unable to suppress a discomforting something.

Of course, that does not mean she has a plan to stop Kazuma.

Rather, she believed that's not something a human can achieve.

Looking up at the thunder cloud heavily covering the night sky, Ayano let out a long breath of admiration.

What was Kazuma controlling right now couldn't be described by such a narrow phenomenon like wind. It was the atmosphere, the airflow and the weather itself.

Who on earth believed that such a behavior was possible for just one Jutsushi.

Right now Kazuma's power was at a totally different level even by the Kannagi's standards.

And yet, why, it wasn't all that scary?

"Wrong, not like that. It's scary - but because it's scary, it's not scary at all"

While murmuring inside her chest such contradictory words, Ayano started walking.

While she didn't know herself what she wanted to do.

In front, of Kazuma.

"Ne- Nee-sama.....?"

Ignoring Ren's appeal, as if protecting Pandemonium, she blocked Kazuma's way.

"Kuuu.....uu....."

In the act of doing so, the torrent of killing intent rushed towards her.

Until now she she blocked his way once or twice but this was the first time this kind of bare thirst for blood was slapped into her.

The fear was about to crush her heart.

Confronting him directly she understood it clearly. The difference between herself, and that overwhelming power

- is this Nii-sama's true power -

Ren's words were resurrected in her ears.

They pierced her heart just like thorns, together with an indistinct sense of discomfort.

Looking at the sky, she thought.

This is Kazuma's real power

- really?

Right away, words of doubt crossed her mind. It was definitely overwhelming.

There's no mistake, from everything she saw until now this is the greatest power.

But, but even so -

" - Aah, so that's the reason"

Abruptly Ayano realized the reason for her discomfort.

That instant, both fear and cowardice became of little importance, the kind of emotions she could ignore.

She looked hard at Kazuma straightforward. Including anger and irritation for the man who fell so low.

"I understand why detective Tachibana and Ren want to stop you. Right now you're so ugly I cannot look at you. "

"Step aside. You're in the way", declared Kazuma indifferently without showing any reaction even to Ayano's words.

Ayano too, continued to ignore Kazuma.

"To be honest, I admired you. I thought that someday I'll catch up with you and you'll approve of me.

- Though in fact, there was no need to expressly tell you. "

"I won't say it a third time. Step aside"

In a monotonous tone Kazuma gave her the final warning. It did not seem that Ayano's words made an impression.

Even so, without hesitation, Ayano boldly declared.

"That's why I can't tolerate you the way you are now. I cannot accept that such an ugly thing was my landmark. I'll open your eyes even by force! "

Together with that declaration, Ayano slapped her palms together.

That dry sound of clapping hands resounded thoroughly clear, pressing down the thunder and scattering the windstorm uneventfully.

Separating the joined hands, a line of red fire connected the space between the palms.

Gripping that flame line with her right hand, and swinging in in a mowing down movement to pull it out.

The line of fire stretching for one meter, instantly materialized forming a brilliant red sword.

The vibrantly red blade, the double edged straight sword.

The blade was clad in golden flames, that appearance releasing a beautiful brilliance was so lovely it was fairy-tale like.

Pointing at him the secret treasure of the Kannagi family, the absolutely invincible conquering the devil divine sword, Enraiha, Ayano showed a fearless smile.

"The way you are right now, I can easily kill you - but don't worry. I'll go easy on you. I'll teach you how does a Spirit Jutsushi fight!"

Kazuma was silent. Following his previous notice, he didn't warn her a third time and fired a wind blade without hesitation.

Ayano swung Enraiha with all her strength at that blow filled with nothing but pure killing intent.

"Guu.....uuh....."

Unable to stop the fast wind blade mowing down, Ayano backed off several steps. Even so, enduring it without breaking her stance, she sharpened her reflexes preparing herself for the next attack.

A three stranded blow. One approaching from the front, and other two describing an arc and coming from left and right.

Ayano hit head-on the frontal attack and by purposefully letting herself be blown away she dodged those coming from the sides.

Curling up her body to let the shock loose while tumbling, she stood up by using that force.

While setting up Enraiha warily, she checked for damage.

"Ok, it's fine. But even so, no way, I'm being over-matched - "

The fact that she was forced back by fighting from the front was unexpected.

The Enjutsushi who was supposed to be the strongest was underpowered in front of the Fuujutsushi who was supposed to be the weakest - if it's a fight between two users beyond first-class, that was a very improbable phenomenon.

But, the reason is simple. Kazuma strength easily breaks trough what is known as common sense. It was just that.

The strongest Fujutsushi, the one Ayano knew, Kazamaki Ryouya of the Fuuga Clan and the Youma possessing him - even if once she and Kazuma managed to bring him down somehow, Kazuma right now is surpassing even that.

"But - "

On top of that Kazuma yet again has the trump card - the power of the Contractor sealed inside him.

"You...!!"

A tremendously heavy blow that didn't seem to be made of air, plus a freebie with a lightning supplement.

Every time they exchanged blows, escaping even Enraiha's protection, a strong numbness was running through her whole body.

"But, but even so!"

Does Kazuma understand? That although he's fighting her seriously he has yet to kill her, the meaning of it?

Rebuking her body becoming numb from the two layered attack - high impact and lightning strike, Ayano grasped Enraiha tightly.

"I won't lose. I'll never lose! Not, not when Kazuma became so weak!"

If the opponent was the real Kazuma, she would have been killed ten times already.

Because Ayano would never be able to perceive everything about those sharply honed wind blades.

Without knowing when and how she will be killed, she's only notice her head dropping down - that was supposed to be the reasonable end.

If the opponent was the real Kazuma, Ayano would never fear him.

Because it would be so natural, it would be so grand, the capacity of feeling fear wouldn't see it coming at all.

But, for Kazuma right now, she can see the upper limit.

He is certainly strong. Overwhelmingly strong. But, even so, right now she can reach him.

She has that self-confidence,

Kazuma's wind was more sharp, more fast.

There's nothing to fear from this rough, powerful attack.

So what if she's stuck by lightning? That thing is nothing more but the useless byproduct of frictional heat.

For Kazuma's real wind, there would be no need to add such extras.

It would be a high speed blow exceedingly purified, cold and sharply honed.

That was what Ayano admired, what was her objective,because it was Kazuma's battle style.

"Everything you thought me - I'll give it all back to you! "

She added a swelling power to the blade. Thoroughly finer and sharper, squeezing all that power in one point -

"Deyaaaaa!!"

Swinging down Enraiha together with a yell, the wind blade was skillfully beheaded.

"Wh.....at.....?"

"Don't be surprised by such a thing! "

Aiming at Kazuma, whose eyes were wide with surprise, Ayano plunged into him in a straight line. Without giving him the time to use Jutsu, to reach him with her sword.

Kazuma smoothly handled his body and avoided the blow that could split a bamboo in two.

He dodged even the retaliating blade as close as a millimeter. Simultaneously he jumped.

The light jump using his legs only below the knees, moved him at a distance of a few meters by riding on the wind.

Quicker than Ayano who tried once more to reduce the distance, Kazuma fired countless wind blades.

The swarm of blades approaching from every direction, circled Ayano without gaps as if it was a cage forged of blades.

"Haaa! "

Ayano rotated fer body on the axis quickly making Enraiha do one revolution.

The point of the sword drew a perfect angle thoroughly burning to nothing all the wind.

As if facing the fragments of the falling, burning wind, the color of shock seemed to paint Kazuma's face.

That only made Ayano's irritation become worse.

"Why are you surprised by something like this? "

Doesn't he understand yet? Doesn't he realize it yet? Even though she doesn't want to see him like that -

"Didn't you teach me all this? The meaning of power! The way to use it! The way we should be! "

She couldn't forgive him. She'll never accept it. This is not Kazuma.

'This is not my Kazuma. '

I'll definitely open your eyes. Fired up by that strong decision, Ayano seeks even more power.

The power that was boiling from inside her body, the power overflowing on the entire world.

Adding it up and polishing it, she poured it on the blade held in her hand.

"It's not enough yet. More, more - "

According to Ayano's will, the flame gushing out from Enraiha, rapidly increased its brilliance.

At the same time, the golden flame was gradually tinged red.

"Ne, Nee-sama!? "

staring at the scarlet flame as if doubting his eyes, Ren shouted.

But, nothing except the Kazuma in front of her reached Ayano's consciousness.

Not Ren's voice and, not even the meaning of the color her flame was releasing - And then, Ayano brandished Enraiha.

"What the heck is going on? "

Kazuma couldn't really understand.

Why, does the likes of Ayano must give him so much trouble. No, on the contrary, right now he was completely pressured.

'**Why**'. That word, was repeated over and over in Kazuma's mind.

'**Why**', can't he kill Ayano?

'**Why**', is Ayano so strong?

'**Why**', must he kill Ayano?

"------!?"

Suddenly the doubt that popped into his head stopped Kazuma's thinking.

It was supposed to be something he shouldn't even have to think about. Eliminating all obstacles, there was only that.

- Towards what purpose?

"Isn't that obvious? To kill Bernhardt and to break Lapis. I am here, only for this reason"

"Didn't you teach me all this!? "

In Kazuma's ears, wondering to himself, Ayano's voice full of anger jumped in.

Now that you mention it, he sometime may have said something like that while acting self-important.

For someone who desired power only for revenge it was an odd thing to say but right now, thinking back on that time, he may have admired himself for it.

For the sake of protecting - Then, what happens to those he couldn't protect?

The power he obtained after losing everything - how the heck should he use it?

Even his revenge was already over.

Killing Bernhardt after this is something trivial. A simple cleaning after.

If so, maybe he wouldn't mind being killed here by Ayano.

Desperately thinking, he looked at the girl burning with anger.

He opened his eyes wide. The brilliance of the dazzling red flame stole his heart.

He saw it only once during the fight with Ryouya, Ayano's - Ayano only's flame.

He couldn't resist being fascinated. He couldn't look away.

That girl he had no interest in except the fact that she was *the Suzerain's daughter*, the brilliance of her soul.

He had no intention of telling anyone but Kazuma secretly named that flame '**Kouen**'.

For this girl who gives off a brilliance like that of the sun, the name '**Kouen**' (trad: solar prominence) suits her.

Right now, Ayano's body was clad in the same flame like that time.

It is by far more refined, a sharpened shape.

That right, just like she said, Kazuma taught her that.

The gathering and convergence of that power, with words and attitude, he continued to teach her.

This is the result of it.

The fruition of both talent and great effort, that one extremity of Enjutsu.

He, on the other hand -

Kazuma looked at the wind he was manipulating. Entrusting his overflowing power to rage, indeed it was an ugly wind.

Because he thought nothing of harmony and such, he inflicted terrible damage to the surroundings.

Of course, it was pointlessly big.

"I can't win with this"

In front of Kazuma, smiling bitterly, Ayano raised Enraiha overhead.

The golden flame emitted from all over her body, was focused on that blade.

And then, she swung it downwards without hesitation.

"Just wake up alreaaaaaaaaaaaaady!"

Staring at the excellent gallant figure of the girl with all his heart, as always, Kazuma thought.

"No, if I were to receive this blow I would sleep eternally, normally - "

Immediately following - the surging red flame scattered the hard wind clad in lightning, defeating the mad Fujutsushi.

Part 4

The wind died down, the thunder ceased, and the park regained his silence.

Dumbfounded, absolutely dumbfounded, Ren stared at the spectacle in front of his eyes.

Holding Enraiha, Ayano in a vigilant posture.

Forward from her, the collapsed Kazuma, his body sunk in the trunk of a tree.

None moved. No, rather that didn't move, one side couldn't move.

After several seconds - convinced Kazuma was out, Ayano raised her eyes to the night sky and let out a small sigh.

The feeling of tension that filled this place soundlessly came apart.

Just now, Ren came to his senses. He ran up to Ayano while shouting.

"Ne- Nee-sama! What a thing! "

An obvious voice of reproach. But, without minding it, Ayano showed the victory sigh, smiling a smile of satisfaction.

"He he - my first victory"

"First victory, you say?.....what would have happened if you killed him!? "

The pressing question was even more reproachful, and finally noticing she was blamed Ayano spoke as if trying to justify herself.

"Aah, no, I don't think he's dead. If that were a direct hit, there would be no remaining body"

The attack had that kind of caloric value. A human body would never survive it.

The fact that Kazuma's body retained it's original form, means he had some kind of defense plan and at least avoided the direct hit.

"But even so, going so far - "

Ren wanted to argue even more but was suddenly interrupted by Ayano, who recovered her serious face.

Standing in the front and pushing Ren aside, Ayano set up Enraiha once more.

Ren Ren turned around quick-witted and agile and looked at the same thing as Ayano.

It was Yagami Kazuma's figure, slowly standing up.

"Nii-sama! "

Ren raised his voice with great joy, while simultaneously realizing he shouldn't be happy.

From here on, the battle with resume.

But right now, that tremendous sense of intimidation totally disappeared from Kazuma.

He couldn't feel anything else but a weak Kehai, just like that of a normal person without special powers.

"Nee-sama.....it's fine"

Judging Kazuma didn't have anymore battle strength, Ren wanted to ask for Ayano's forgiveness. But, that moment -

"---------!? "

Ayano's eyes opened wide.

In the gap of that one instant she was focused on Ren, Kazuma was before her eyes - he approached to a point-blank range enough for their bodies to touch.

"Wha------"

It was by no means a fast movement. Rather, his walking felt slack.

And yet, for some reason she couldn't react at all.

That way of walking that slipped into the gap between her cognizance and her perception, it was unnatural because it was beyond spontaneous and didn't inspire an out of place feeling to be worthy of her vigilance.

Brushing her feet while she couldn't do nothing and while thinking she's going to fall on her ass, Enraiha's pommel was kicked up.

As if part of a comedic duo, Ayano was thrown down face up, both her hands raised.

When looking up on her field of vision, the night sky and a blurred shoe sole were reflected.

The shoe sole area was rapidly magnified and filled all her field of vision.

"----------!!"

Unable to avoid or defend, Ayano strongly closed her eyes. But even so, mercilessly, Kazuma strikes down the shoe sole with all his strength.

- On the ground, a breath away from Ayano's head lying down face up.

"Well, something like this?"

A voice missing tension reached the petrified Ayano's ear. Next to her head, the foot that even sunk into the ground was drawn back.

Lumps of earth dug up together with his foot, fell on her face in chunks.

"Eeh, aah------"

"I always pay my debts"

Under the cleared up night sky, moonlight was shining upon that fearless smiling face.

Understanding it was Kazuma's familiar tone Ren's eyes sparked.

"Nii-sama"

"Hmm, what?"

Kazuma asked back unnaturally, in really the same manner as usual. Next, he changed his line of sight at his feet as if he saw something very curious.

"So, what are you doing there? Is snugging on the ground so comfortable? "

Quickly getting up, Ayano screamed.

"Didn't you kick me and threw me down!? "

"I'm asking about the reason of you staying kicked and thrown down"

"I'm amazed by your lack of common sense! "

Shouting once more she started sweeping the dust from her hair and face.

And then she stabbed Kazuma with a dangerous gaze.

"Besides, why are you unhurt? "

"I warded it off skillfully.", declared Kazuma nonchalantly.

Those remarks were very simple but it wasn't easy to imagine how much technique finesse was need to be able to say *I warded it off skillfully* about that calorific value.

The specific technique must be beyond imagination.

"So, it's fine if I assume you returned to sanity?"

"Well, I don't remember not being sane"

In response to Ayano's continuing cross examination, Kazuma played dumb.

Naturally, that attitude greatly stimulated Ayano's imperial wrath.

"Ho hou, you're spouting those kind of words this late in the game? "

Groaning in a subdued voice, she grabbed Kazuma by the collar, drew his face near and glared at him at point-blank rage, their noses touching.

With a smile Kazuma continued to gaze at the angry face of the still energetic girl.

Yes, once you noticed it, it was a very simple thing.

He decided to protect, just like he swore back them.

So that he won't err again, the duty of those with power - whitewashing, it doesn't really matter.

From that time he was charmed by that red brilliance, he decided.

To exist together, to look over her and to see everything with his own eyes.

The feelings he has for Tsoi Rin, they are still here even now, unchanged.

But, he can no longer use that pretext to cut down his present.

Because there isn't just one precious thing.

From his side Kazuma brought his face closer to Ayano's scowling at him very, very close.

"Wha - W- wait!"

Ayano forgot her anger and was panicking at the quick intimacy, dangerous from another point of view.

But, Kazuma didn't stop.

The distance that was less that five centimeters became three, one and then - minus.

Bringing his lips close to the red ears of the girl that stiffened as if misunderstanding something, Kazuma whispered.

"Prepare yourself, you just reminded me. "

I'll never part once again. He decided so once again.

I won't gave up on anything. I'll obtain everything I want.

"I'm willful and greedy"

Saying so, he kissed her lightly on the nape of the neck.

"Hyan!?"

The girl who screamed without seductiveness, still didn't realized.

That she had been literally <<claimed>>.

That she was recognized as <<the spoils I'll obtain no matter what>> by the most difficult man of this world.

- Did you think you can escape?

Whether it was unlucky that she failed to hear those whispered words or whether she was fortunate - surely not even the gods know that.

Chapter 6 - The end of the feast
Part 1

"Aaaaaaaaaa, by the way!! ", shouted Ren suddenly remembering something important.

"Wh- What's going on? "

At the sudden voice, Ayano looked at him in shock.

But without caring about that, Ren talked on and on in excitement.

"Nee-sama, since when are you able to use Shinen? "

"-------ha? "

"You used it just now, didn't you? The crimson flame with the same aura as Nee-sama! "

"-----I did? "

Really not conscious about it, Ayano continuously fired rapid questions with an off the point face.

That unreliable attitude made Ren lose his confidence, instinctively asking his brother for help.

"Nii-sama, you saw it.....right? "

"Aah"

Kazuma clearly agreed.

Ayano stared at Kazuma in a daze. Gradually the meaning of those words permeated in her brain, her complexion rapidly changing.

"Eeh? Really? Did I --- the god flame.....No way!? "

"It's true! Congratulations! "

Smiling with all his face, Ren blessed Ayano.

But, immediately after, noticing Kazuma's face was extremely calm, he asked suspicious.

"Nii-sama, you don't seem very surprised"

"Yeah. Because I saw it before? "

'"Eeeeeeeeh!? "'

Ren and Ayano shouted in chorus their surprise.

Ayano grabbed Kazuma by the collar and cross-questioned him.

"S- since when? Where? "

"Last year. When you fought with Ryoya in Kyoto."

Answering straightforward, Kazuma sighted.

"It seems like you didn't tell the Suzerain - but, no way - You really didn't notice? "

"Why - why, didn't you tell me before!? "

"....."

Taking time to tease Ayano, Kazuma stared at her with an exceedingly cold gaze.

Faced with that blatant feeling of contempt not even reptiles gave, Ayano's face became stiff.

".....Do you want to know the answer? "

"N- no, it's fine!"

She shook her head as much as possible. At the same time, she plugged her ears not to hear that severe cynicism.

"W- well, I'm sure it's because you were that much focused on the battle. "

Ren forced his way through in the space between the two and sternly scowled at Kazuma.

Of course, Kazuma won't feel sorry just because of that.

"But even so, to have three divine flame users in the same period of time is amazing, right? "

Although trying to soothe Ayano, Ren was making merry innocently.

It was easy to understand he was genuinely happy by Ayano's growth.

For Ayano, who worried nowadays if she wasn't surpassed by Ren since her *little brother*'s growth had been remarkable, that innocence gave her mixed feelings.

But even so, she contain her happiness at being able to yield a divine flame.

Her face broke into a smile.

"Waah, what do I do, I'm so happy"

"No, I think being happy it's normal. What will you name it? "

"Hmm, that's right, '**Red Divine Flame'** is not really cool"

"I think it's meaningless thinking about it"

At the two who were in high spirits, a thoroughly indifferent voice poured water on them. Of course, it was Kazuma.

"You just used something that by chance looks like a divine flame and not only you weren't controlling it, you weren't even self-aware, right?

That kind of person can't be called a divine flame user. There's also the possibility it was just a miracle that only happens twice in your life. "

Ayano and Ren gazed at Kazuma with a purely spiteful look.

"Why does this guy has to say such sensible things? "

"That's right, we have just gotten excited! "

"Look at reality - would it be better to say that? Besides, now it's not the time to frolic, right? "

Kazuma's gaze pointed at Pandemonium. At the same time -

"Wuaaaaaaaaaah!!"

Raising a war cry, a human like thing came running. With an expression like he was prepared for death, he headed for Pandemonium in a straight line.

"----Ah? "

While the trio was looking over him blankly, the man belonging to the <<Seeds>> reached the entrance.

With both hands raised overhead, the man shouted loudly.

"Yes, I did it! I did it! I'm first! *The ultimate power* is mine! "

The man was ecstatic. A soft light was suddenly lit at his feet. As if blessing the man, it illuminated on his figure -

"O.....Oo....Ooooooooo!? "

His body was slowly eroded.

Inside the light, the man's body melted as if falling apart during cooking. His skin burst open, his flesh was torn off, his internal organs melted, and even his bones -

Nothing remained. As if his existence wasn't there from the beginning, the man disappeared without trace.

"Wh- what happened? "

"Well, he died, right? "

Contrastive with Ren who screamed openly shaken, Kazuma answered really not carrying from the bottom of his heart.

"……..that man, wasn't he the first? "

"No, he was the first."

"Then, what about that ultimate power? "

"Something like that didn't exist from the beginning, obviously"

"……..you're very blunt, huh? "

"Because that's how the world is"

"Aah, another one"

Ayano pointed ahead where another <<Seed>> was aiming for Pandemonium. This time there was a slight deviation from the human form.

But, the result was the same. Wrapped up in the light, they melted and disappeared without leaving any trace.

It continued with the third and the fourth.

"How to say this, it's that, right?"

While looking at the <<Seeds>> practically blindly pushing their way to destruction, Kazuma murmured.

"It's a spectacle like the suicide of lemmings"

"……Nii-sama……"

Hearing his brother's casual thoughts who really didn't care, Ren revealed a sorrowful groan.

But, Kazuma advanced the conversation without paying attention to him.

"Well, it's convenient if the other party kills them for us. Forget about them and thing about what comes after."

"-----yeah"

Ayano too, heartlessly agreed, shifting her attention to Pandemonium's entrance.

This time there were no more <<Seeds>>. But -

"In this situation, it seems dangerous trying to enter from the front"

"You want to enter? "

Seeing Ayano murmuring so, including of a sense of crisis, Kazuma asked in return unexpectedly.

"It will be done quicker if you were to burn all of it from the outside, right? This is not really a game, there's no need to go to the dungeons and pick a fight with the big boss, you know?"

"You're such a….."

As Kazuma was thinking nothing else but killing the enemy, Ayano groaned as if she endured a headache.

"It's possible that Nanase and Yukari are inside, you know!? we can't take such a violent action. "

"Nanase and Yukari?"

"If you ask *Who are they?* I'll kill you"

Warned in an ominous tone, very prudently Kazuma swallowed his words.

"They were abducted because of you, so take responsibility! "

"....."

Leaving Nanase aside , it was unreasonable to make him take the blame for Yukari but, wisely Kazuma refrained from objecting.

"Then, let's get in already"

"But we can't use that entrance, right? "

Ayano was fearful of sharing the fate of the <<Seeds>> if she were to use the front entrance.

But Kazuma declared in the usual disposition.

"Just by looking, the entrance doesn't seem to have any kind of trick but even if it had, it must have been inserted in the <<Seeds>>'s bodies. "

"But, if by any chance....."

"Then, how about this? "

The moment Kazuma said so, a sphere was gouged out in the Pandemonium wall and it collapsed inside.

The new entrance had a diameter of two meters, enough for them to easily enter made to the right next to the entrance.

"Let's go"

"------huh? Will you go first? ", asked Ayano looking quizzically at Kazuma.

"Is there a problem? "

"No, this is you we're talking about so won't make me go in front to confirm the security or something? "

".....you, do you think of me as a cruel and heartless brute of a man? "

"Oh, did you hear that Ren?"

Unnaturally Ayano talked to Ren only. But clear enough for Kazuma to hear.

"It seems this man would want to so *that's not it* as if he doesn't know his social position"

".....well....."

Worried about the reply, Ren mumbled.

On the other hand, without minding those two, Kazuma started to trespass on Pandemonium by himself.

"Hey, come already"

"Aah, yes!"

"Don't order me around! "

While both showed typical responses both followed after Kazuma. Of course, he wasn't suddenly disintegrated.

While looking around inside Pandemonium, who also remained the same, Ayano asked.

"So, what are you going to do? "

"*What*, you say. There's nothing else to do except search around, right? Because we don't know if the interior is the same as before."

"Aah, not about that. What I want to know is the way to deal with Lapis. "

"----------What are you trying to say? ", asked Kazuma without turning back.

"Well, Lapis is your former lover right? Will you fight - "

'Dan!'

Pushing out his arm just before Ayano's face, he hit the wall hard.

"I don't know from who and what you heard but - "

With a tone that clearly endured something, Kazuma talked.

"Tsoi Rin died. In front of me. "

"……Kazuma……"

"Tsoi Rin died. She will never again revive. I know that is a certainty, more that anything else. Because the outward appearance is the same, because her mental core was made by using Tsoi Rin's residual thought, what of it? That's nothing but the proof she's a fake."

What was called the residual thought was nothing but the copy of the awareness that was etched in the space. It's true that was an accurate representation of the person's consciousness at that time but, after all it's nothing but an imitation - nothing but a one-sided <<record>> accurately reproduced.

Naturally, what was there wasn't the heart - nor its soul.

Even if the recorded information is numerous, it can't react any other way than the person when it was alive.

But, of course that couldn't be called a thought but a mechanical feedback that was already imprinted - it cannot work any other way.

"If there's something she wanted to say I'll hear it as long as it doesn't get in the way of accomplishing our goal. If she does, I'll kill her - Do you have something else you want to know? "

"……"

Ayano silently shook her head.

She understood she just made the greatest blunder possible.

Surely, Kazuma's words are correct.

Even if it's the way to deal with Lapis, is he really thinking like that?

But, there was no need to make him put it into words?

Kazuma was silently starring at Ayano, hanging her head in shame, succumbing to feelings of remorse.

But, several seconds after, with a playful smile he poked her forehead, forcibly pointing it upwards.

"Hyan!? Ka- Kazuma------?"

Holding up her forehead and peering into Ayano's face, looking up with tears in her eyes, Kazuma said.

"If you like, should I leave her to you? "

"Eeh? Wh- what? "

"Lapis' opponent. You lost big last time so you're probably not satisfied, right? "

Ayano's face flushed red and she shouted at the utterance that wounded her great pride.

"Wh- who lost big time? I was just about to win but didn't you get in the way? "

"Is that so? Well, you can say whatever you like in a what-if story - "

"Waah, this man is really pissing me off"

"Nii-sama....Nee-sama too, could you please stop your lover's quarrel in this situation? "

*"**W -H - O'** is having a lover's quarrel? "*

"I - I apologize! "

While talking so casually while walking, a solid door appeared before the group.

Part 2

"Hey, is this ----"

In front of the door she remembered, Ayano looked at Kazuma carrying a faint anxiety.

Kazuma made a small nod.

"Aah. We met Bernhardt here before."

If this were the same Pandemonium, there would a huge hall beyond this door, and Bernhardt would be sitting down on a chair in the middle of it.

"I don't know about now. For the time being, let's open it"

Without any kind of strong feelings, Kazuma seized the door's knob and pushed in. Raising a thick sound, the door slowly opened.

"--------!"

The moment he stepped in the room, the lightnings turned on simultaneously.

The same large hall as before was illuminated. Inside there was just one luxurious chair.

And then, sitting down on that chair, a man in a black robe.

"Welcome to Pandemonium"

Bathing in the trio's gaze, the man spoke in comfortable words of friendly reception.

Behind him, like his servants, two quiet girls deeply bowed.

"Nanase! Yukari! ", shouted Ayano when seeing them.

One was dressed in an inflammatory bondage garment, the girl with sharp features.

The other one in a contrastive gentle image was a maid - but the shirt the girl wore was very close to a micro-mini.

There's no need to say it, they were Ayano's kidnapped friends, Kudou Nanase and Shinomiya Yukari.

" - which means, you're Utsumi? "

"Call me <<Grand Mage>>"

Responding in a voice full of composure, Utsumi took down the the hood that was covering him.

From the shadow of the hood that provoking but unforgettable frog face peeked.

"Because, I already reached a higher existence than the lot of you. "

"That nonsense is inconsequential. I'm taking them back - Nanase! Yukari! "

Ignoring Utsumi's self-important speech, Ayano called her friends. But, there was no response.

"It's useless", declared Utsumi, still self-important.

"About those two, nothing reaches them except for my voice. They are submissive only to me, they are my slaves"

"……!! You……."

"Wait a little"

Kazuma got the better of Ayano enraged when her friends were branded as slaves.

While seizing Ayano's right hand, he asked Utsumi.

"It's your choice to have a make-believe game with the maids but tell me this. Where is Bernhardt? "

"------Bernhardt?"

As Utsumi figuratively scratched his head, Kazuma corrected himself.

"Does he still call himself Vesalius? He's wearing masks in spite of his age and dodgy costumes, the Lord of Pandemonium"

"The Lord of Pandemonium? That's me"

"…….Where is Vesalius?"

"He's nowhere anymore"

"……."

Even though he was patiently repeating his question only to receive out of focus answers, this time receiving a Zen answer, Kazuma breathed a bitter sigh.

"In short you are using your right to remain silent until we play the *let's break the finger bones game*, right? "

".....You're way of talking is unpleasant. No way, do you think we are equals? "

"Don't say such idiotic things. I don't remember falling so low that I have to deal with bugs like you. Come again after you reach the vertebrate, fool"

Verbally knocking Utsumi down with continuous vilifying remarks, Kazuma asked again.

"Where is Vesalius? "

"-------He's dead. I killed him."

This time Utsumi answered clearly so that there would be no misunderstanding.

"We're finished here, right? You have no more questions, right? Besides Vesalius was only born and lived until now only for my sake. "

"Hee...."

Kazuma negligently made a non-committal answer but without minding, Utsumi continued his fervent speech.

"That's right. All those foolish <<Seeds>> that don't know anything, Vesalius, Pandemonium were born to make the existence of the excellent me complete. For example, do you know, Kannagi-san? "

"------what?"

Confused for abruptly having been brought up, Ayano replied.

As if having just waited for the opportunity, Utsumi talked on and on.

"The origin if the <<Seed>>'s power, the Youma turned to digital data and possessing them through the Internet, those Youma were all the copy of the same existence"

"Well - I knew of it"

Fleetingly looking at Kazuma, the source of that information, Ayano answered.

Doing so, Utsumi asked again.

"Then, have you thought about investigating this further? If that's so, did you asked yourself where is the <<Original Youma>>? "

"------!!"

Surprised, Ayano opened her eyes wide. Since for her the <<Seeds>> had a low priority, she didn't thought about them to that extent.

Examining Kazuma's expression for a second time, he seemed not to give a damn.

Even now when that question was presented, he ignored it with zero interest.

But, without waiting for their reaction, Utsumi triumphantly pointed to his own chest.

"That is inside me! I am the only true <<Seed>> that fused with the original Youma. The others were nothing else but lab rats to help me become complete! "

"Lab rats? "

"That's right, those guys fed to copy parasites unconsciously changing their bodies reported to Pandemonium. And deriving the optimal fusion process from that accumulated data manufactured the superman exceeding all humanity. That was Pandemonium's purpose! "

"I see"

Ayano nodded with a serious look. If one were to remove the empty superhuman slogan, she could understand everything else.

"Then, what about the ultimate power? "

"There is no such thing! ", Utsumi promptly declared.

"Why would the likes of lab rats should obtain such a thing? That was just garbage collecting! For the sake of managing with the used trash, they were lured here with a sweet bait and retrieved, only that! Hahahahahahahahaha!"

"Hey------"

While looking at Utsumi laughing loudly with an indifferent expression, Kazuma asked.

"Do we still have to be around this thing? "

"Yeah, it's enough. I pretty much heard all I wanted to. Aah, but, Nanase and Yukari's rescue has maximum priority. You know right? "

"Aah"

With a short nod, Kazuma lightly changed his posture. Guessing that intention, Utsumi's body suddenly shivered - and then, he showed a studied sneer.

"Do you intend to challenge me? A human? Kannagi-san, I heard you - your family has a reasonable amount of power for people. But that is after all only a human lev - "

Before he finished his sentence, Utsumi's head was half beheaded. The severe wound reaching his oral cavity made him scream disgracefully.

"Hi, hiiiiiiiiii!? No way, no way....."

As the barrier he thought sacred was cut through like paper, Utsumi's composure disappeared without a trace.

Hiding himself behind the chair he stood on until now, he screamed in a loud voice.

"Na- Nanase! Yukari! Defend me! "

The order was launched from behind a chair but even so, those two faithfully followed.

Nanase and Yukari, as if trying to protect him with their bodies, stood in front of him. But -

At the time a gust of wind blew through and lifted the curse from both their bodies and souls without a trace.

Simultaneously losing consciousness, their bodies about to collapse, as if scooping them out, the wind carried them behind Kazuma's group close to the wall.

"--------And? "

Kazuma coldly asked Utsumi, who lost the second and his last defense. No matter how much a foolish human he was, the overwhelming difference in power was blatant.

The fear of the closing in death.

"U, uuu.....uuuuuuuuu....."

Faced with the intense sense of urgency that he never experienced before, his brittle mind was insufficient and broke.

"Uuaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!! "

Screaming and brandishing his magic wand like a spoiled child, Utsumi made his power run wild.

Fireballs, lightning, water bullets stormed inside the hall spreading a confused destruction.

Exceedingly calm, Kazuma only warded off the attack headed towards them and took the opportunity to take Utsumi's head.

Like it was a joke, the severed head flew high in the air and tumbled lightly.

From the headless still vertical body, fresh blood spurted out like a water fountain.

"-------Is he dead? "

"What do you mean? ", asked Ayano as Kazuma for some reason murmured so, surprised.

"No, I though he must have at least one more trick"

"You mean to have been remodeled without his knowledge and attack after a big transformation? "

Those words were intended as a joke but Kazuma nodded without laughing.

"Because the memory of him killing Bernhardt was added afterwards, to have the person himself appear before him on the verge of death, drag him to the depths of despair and die because of it"

At the excessively bad taste trick, Ayano grimaced and groaned.

"What sort of guy is Bernhardt? "

"This is not something restricted to Bernhardt but it applies to the majority of Majutsushi from <<Almagest>> ", spit out Kazuma abhorred from the bottom of his heart.

"The worst criminal is the one that takes delight in showing off "

"........waah - "

Since Kazuma was the one saying how nasty he was, Ayano couldn't even imagine it.

She earnestly thought she doesn't want to be involved with that man.

Of course, it was obvious that she wasn't able to do so.

"-----As expected, he wasn't able to finish the chat"

The clear resounding woman voice, indicated the beginning of the next development.

The rolling about severed head - before they composed themselves, rolled in front of the girl who stood up unnoticed.

Chestnut-color hair, lapis lazuli blue eyes, her body dressed in a gothic lolita dress, that figure standing there gracefully was dream-like pretty -----

Lapis ---- born from the transient remnants of the broken memories of the girl Kazuma was forever parted with, kicked with her tiptoe the head that came rolling.

She coldly ordered the headless body still standing.

"Pick it up"

The corpse obediently bent over, seized with both hands the returned cranium and placed it on top of its neck. At that moment, Utsumi was rebooted.

"Ri- ridiculous, this is - huh? "

Becoming aware of the gap in his consciousness, with a quizzical gaze Utsumi looked around and stopped when he saw Lapis.

A bewildered voice leaked out.

"La - Lapis!? Just when did you - no, where were you until - "

"Shut up"

At Lapis's command Utsumi was immediately silent.

That was clearly not the product of his own will but something froze it pinning down his mouth.

His eyes opened to the utmost limit.

Disregarding Utsumi who started an unsightly pantomime Lapis turned to Kazuma's group.

And then, she elegantly bowed.

"As a substitute of Master, I welcome all of you. With all due respect, all of you will become our last guests. Please feel at home. "

"Bernhardt? "

"He had already departed. Right now he's up in the sky"

"Is he dead? "

As if blaming him, Lapis motionlessly stared at Kazuma, cracking jokes. But even so, she consciously corrected her answer.

"It means he's in the middle of traveling by plane. I won't tell you his whereabouts. Even so, I have a verbal message. Will you please listen? "

"I will"

"Allow me to leave at this point. I am unable to greet you directly and I truly apologize. But, I believe we'll meet soon enough, he said "

A short period of silence. The pressure of a certain *something* rose closely to the critical point inside his body.

But, getting it out of his system with a cynical smile, Kazuma spoke in a light tone.

"Fuu, he ran away, huh? Whatever. I was kind of expecting that. "

Facing Lapis, looking slightly doubtful and waiting in silence for a continuation, Kazuma concluded.

"Were you the one to direct this event? "

"Yes", agreed Lapis with a proud smile.

Without feeling ashamed of how many humans were eaten by the Youma, their fates ruined.

"How did you know? "

"The scenario is cliché."
"…….cliché, is it….."
Lapis was feeling dejected. The ups and down of a strange emotion were huge.
Or possibly, they could be thought of as unnatural.
"Because Bernhardt would have twisted it a bit more. I thought it was strange. "
"I see……but I did my best"
"You need more training"
"-----That's right. I'll be diligent"
"Hey! "
Those two talked together comfortable for some reason. But, a crushed to death, dangerous voice forced its way between them.
lt was Ayano.
"Why are you softening towards your mutual enemy!? Do you understand the situation? "
In a certain way it was a justified rebuke but calmly, Kazuma didn't show any indication of consideration.
But, Lapis was different.
Deeply bowing her head as if she was impressed for some reason, with a look full of determination, she stared at them. And then -
"That's right. If the villain is cheered on by the enemy, he will lose face. I will be strong for the sake of Master who entrusted this to me."
Tightly grasping her small fists, she declared gallantly.
"This is how it is, so can I be more villain-like and proudly explain the diabolic plan? Please, can I? "
"The hell you can! "
Unsheathing Enraiha, Ayano shouts.
"Do you think I'll be caught in by your transparent stalling? "
Those violent words came with a thrusting sword. But even so, Lapis wasn't perturbed, and asked back in wonder.
"Stalling, is it? For what purpose? "
"W- what - "
"Master is already high in the sky. No matter if it's a Fuujutsushi - or even a Contractor, you won't find him. Why would I need to stall? "
"Th - then, is it necessary to have this discussion? "
Resisting with a well-reasoned argument, Ayano raised her voice. But -
Lapis' composed manner didn't waver.
"Master said so - the villain proudly disclosing his secret before the climax is a *rule*"
"Wha - "
Ayano's jaw dropped with a loud sound. Her tension and her knees grew weak in front on the too much stupidity.
As she was about to crumble down she used Enraiha like a cane and glared at the girl smiling softly.

"Y - you.....what's up with that great stupidity? Aren't you totally different from before! Are you an airhead? "

Lapis was totally unable to cope with the shouted criticism.

On the contrary, as if she was praised, she bowed her head in agreement while happily smiling.

"That's right. I did change. -- That is a good thing. "

"-----what? "

"I want a *heart*", Lapis said to the dumbfounded Ayano.

She included an earnest wish in her supplication.

"I am nothing more that manufactured life but I think by myself and intelligence was given to me so that I judge. But, after all those are nothing more but *functions* given to me to that I can accurately execute orders.

And thus, I feel attached to Yagami Kazuma. But even that was inserted inside me when I was made, nothing more but a granted emotion.

Real feelings are not given by anyone, but naturally come from inside. I do not feel that."

The puppet desiring a heart. It had been talked about repeatedly in fairy-tales. A deeply moving theme.

But, watching Lapis with half-opened eyes, Ayano asked.

"I understand what you're trying to say but what does that have to do with the present situation? "

"Master told me so. The human - the existence possessing will, must always be flexible. "

"Flexible? "

"Yes. You could also call it the desire to have a good time. Even at the times one has a purpose, not to concentrate in realizing that purpose with all one's might but to have the flexibility of enjoying oneself in the process. "

"……..And? "

"That's why, I was thinking of enjoying myself in the process and perform various tricks. Will you bear with me? "

Lapis smiled adorably and innocently.

Unable to bear the gap between that smiling face full of cuteness and these crafty remarks, Ayano shouted.

"Hey you, think of others' troubles before thinking of your own enjoyment! "

"But, Master said, if you think about others troubles you won't benefit from free will."

Feeling a loss for words at the excessive selfish words, Ayano remembered the words Kazuma said about them.

"They're definitely the worst, these guys……."

Even Bernhardt, the maker of that doll, filling her head with worthless ideas, even Lapis faithfully adhering to her master's teachings, both of them were the worst.

"So, should I start my explanation? "

An the good ground of silencing Ayano, Lapis started her explanation matter-of-fact.

"I think Utsumi proudly said so before but there are a few grave errors in his exposition. First, it's about the origin of the copied Youma that infected those people - the existence Utsumi called <<Original Youma>>.

Actually the summoning of the <<Original Youma>> has yet to achieved. The one that possessed Utsumi was nothing but a replica, just like the other <<Seeds>>. "

"Wh- what!?"

Raising a shout of extreme surprise, unnoticed, Utsumi regained his freedom.

Not showing any sign of surprise, the trio waited for the continuation of the story with apathetic faces.

Dissatisfied, Lapis pursed her lips and said in a reproachful manner.

"----you're not surprised, huh? "

"No, did some unexpected development happened for us to be surprised? "

The fact that Utsumi killed Bernhardt, the bullshit that the result of Bernhardt's creation was something like Utsumi - Kazuma didn't believed it for a second.

For Kazuma, the present development was quite reasonable, or you could call it the natural turn of events.

"Is that so - what a disappointment.", Lapis murmured truly disappointed and then continued.

"The other mistake, the biggest one, was that he recognized himself as Utsumi Kousuke. The character called Utsumi Kousuke was already eaten by the parasitic Youma and disappeared. "

"Wh- what is that? "

Just like the previous time, Utsumi was the only one shouting.

"I am right here! It's impossible for me to have disappeared! "

"Why is that? ", asked Lapis very directly.

"Wh- why, you ask.....? "

"For <<Seeds>> if their levels were raised that much, they would be eaten by Youma from the inside. Why would you, the one possessing the most power among <<Seeds>> be an exception? "

"That, that's.....because I'm special....."

"Special? Does that means that you have something - a certain something where you excel above all humans? "

Lapis' words didn't allow any any deceit, no cheating.

His ostentation scraped off bit by bit, Utsumi's complexion turned ashen.

"There's absolutely nothing special about your attributes. No, you may be called especially inferior. Actually a few days after you became <<Third Class>> you were unable to preserve your ego. "

"No way.....no way.....but then, what am I? If I am supposed to be extinct, why am I still here? "

"You were bait to lure Yagami Kazuma inside. ", Lapis replied definitely.

"The existence of Utsumi Kousuke was the main factor that guided Kannagi Ayano inside Pandemonium. And then, when Kannagi Ayano acts we

understood there was a high probability Yagami Kazuma would follow. That's why it was imperative that Utsumi's existence had to continue until now.

For that purpose, Master created a virtual personality that would react just like the alive Utsumi. It was pasted on the outer layer of the Youma that usurped Utsumi's body. That is you. "

"No, no.....that's ridiculous....."

"The most conclusive evidence are those girls."

Lapis pointed at Yukari and Nanase that were still unconscious.

"If you were the genuine Utsumi, why were you satisfied of just keeping them close without raping them? It's because you were an extremely convenient existence that can never disobey. "

"Th- that's....."

"Wait a second! Is that true? "

Ayano cut her way through that conversation. If that was actually true -

"It is. "

Lapis assured her with a gentle smile that was reassuring.

"It's because such instinctive urges like sexual desires are not factored in a virtual personality. Utsumi didn't defile those girls. Don't worry. "

"I see.....I'm glad....."

Retelling the most pressing issue, Ayano was relieved from the bottom of her heart.

But, on the other hand, Utsumi sank in a pit of desperation.

Just like Lapis said, Utsumi finally realized the fact that he hadn't touched Nanase and Yukari and that he hadn't had any sexual desires for the last few days.

Frightened by the truth, Utsumi opened his eyes wide.

"Then....am I really a virtual personality.....?"

"Yes"

"I was made.....nothing more but a program, you say? "

"That's right"

"The real me, is already dead you said.....? "

"Just like that"

The instant the conclusion was clear, Utsumi fell to his knees like a puppet whose strings were cut and became heart-broken.

From his partly opened lips, a meaningless sob escaped.

That instant, Utsumi's self-identity was undermined from the basis and crumbled.

His consciousness wasn't strong enough to bear the helpless reality he was something manufactured. He wasn't created strong.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaa! "

A pathetic scream surged out. For example, if a manufactured human has a heart - no, if a manufactured human were to have a heart, that lament would touch anyone's heart.

And, the same way like humans, Lapis listened attentively to Utsumi's cry and looked at that expression. In her eyes the color of ecstasy was faintly but surely dwelling.

Kazuma asked the ecstatic Lapis staring at Utsumi.

"Are you happy? "

"----Eeh? Yeah, that's right. Because the plan was followed almost perfectly.

Thanks to that, I have the feeling I managed to enjoy myself in the process for the first time. "

".....I see, you're happy, huh? About making others despair. ", Kazuma murmured in an unbelievable bitter voice.

Hearing that, Lapis showed for the first time an expression of understanding. But -

"Nevertheless, Master said so. No matter the shape, what moves a person's heart is an being that has a similar heart. '

But it's really disappointing that sadness is what's moving ones heart so, don't you think this was a big step for me? "

Saying so, she smiled. Full of joy from the bottom of her heart.

"That's enough. "

In a calm voice Kazuma interrupted Lapis' speech.

"Shut the fuck up. With Tsoi Rin's face, with Tsoi Rin's voice, don't speak another word. "

A surging killing intent. Feeling that just like physical coercion, Ayano and Ren backed off.

But even so, Lapis' smile didn't waver.

"Fu fu, your Tsoi Rin wouldn't do something do inhuman - is that what you try to say?

It seems that inside you Tsoi Rin is being idolized like a holy woman, huh? "

"Not really, I don't think she was a holy woman but.....at the very least she wasn't the kind of woman who would get happy by tricking people. "

"Is that so? Well, it doesn't matter. Just like you asked, I will shut my mouth. Beside the time came. "

Perceiving a enormously sinister stir at those words, the trio's faces stiffened.

"What do you mean? "

"Just now, the last of <<Seed>> disappeared. The end is about to start. ", declared Lapis solemnly as if she was a shrine maiden speaking like an oracle.

"Just like I said previously, the <<Original Youma>> has yet to be summoned. Because it's an existence of the highest rank, we haven't able to pay a corresponding compensation to summon it.

But, from the moment Pandemonium was established until now, we offered the souls of a large number of men to the copies of that existence.

Even if you reduced that number somewhat, the total number reached a hundred and thirty - so many souls were sacrificed and offered via the copies.

The compensation was paid. The grand duke of Hell, Belial, will manifest itself in this world. "

"------!!"

In front of all present, catching their breath in shock, Lapis suddenly dispersed the solemn atmosphere and, appropriate for a girl her age, she smiled very lovely.

"I apologize. I lied. Just like Ayano-san said, I was stalling until now. "

Sticking out her tongue in a impish manner, she laughed thoroughly innocently.

"This time, I caught you, huh? "

The angel trained by the devil, laughed -

Part 3

"Is that Bernhard's true objective?", asked Kazuma quickly pulling himself together.

But Lapis clearly denied it.

"No. The purpose of this plan is a simple possession experiment data collection. The fact that such a high rank demon like Belial was chosen to posses bodies, that may have a profound meaning only Master knows -

As a matter of fact, I think it must be meaningless, because of his maniac inclination for using only the best. ", continued Lapis nonchalantly intermingling toward her master.

"Actually, when we met at Tokyo Government Office, the experiment was pretty much completed. We could have gone back home just like that but Master stated that would be boring.

Therefore, it came to carry out the summoning of Belial as a side show. Does it amuse you?"

An elegant speech. But after hearing that, it was not something that could be endured.

With unconcealed agitation, Ayano shook Kazuma, pressing a question.

"W- wait, what are we going to do!? "

"What, you ask - well, if we don't stop it it will be bad, right? "

Belial - that name carried the meaning of '**worthlessness'**, it was a top rank great demon.

Whether it was a god flame user, whether it was a contractor, a human level existence will never be able to oppose it.

If such a thing were to be released above ground, it's no exaggeration to say it's a crisis that will lead to the world destruction.

It must be stopped no matter what.

"But, how to stop it...?"

While thinking about it, Kazuma took notice of Utsumi. Since his virtual personality was crushed he was squatting without showing any reaction at the present situation.

"Is that the core? "

"No"

As if she read Kazuma's thoughts, Lapis declared detached.

"I won't stop you but disposing of it is meaningless. Utsumi's soul was already consecrated to Belial, so his body cannot be the object to summon Belial with."

"Aah, I see, then - "

While looking over his shoulder, Kazuma held his right hand aloft. A mighty power was controlled by that hand.

"Then I should just smash the Jutsushi"

In front of Kazuma's attack, Lapis stood rock still without displaying any attitude of protecting herself.

Looking at Kazuma with lonely eyes, she murmured.

"Will you kill me again, Kazuma?"

"------!!"

The raised hand stiffened without swinging downward. The bundled power idly came apart and scattered.

"You baka! "

Pushing aside the petrified Kazuma, Ayano plunged into Lapis.

But Lapis took out the crystal large sword from air and blocked Enraiha's blow.

"Wha- "

"I made it just like yours. "

In the midst of locking sword to sword, expressing an out-of-place soft smile, Lapis said.

"That's handy. Because my weapon is a bit over-sized, carrying it is inconvenient - "

"Who cares!"

Pressing down the sword and letting anger take its natural course, she fired another blow.

With force enough to slice the crystal edge, the flame sword was swung.

"What on earth are you thinking!? Do you want to destroy the world for your entertainment?"

"Of course we don't want that."

Lapis freely manipulated the crystal sword and sidestepped that slashing attack including tremendous force.

The skill she managed that huge sword like it was one of her limbs seemed to have been polished even more since last time.

"Belial can't be perfectly summoned with only a hundred sacrifices. The time he will move will be a few seconds and his power greatly restricted. The world won't get destroyed - perhaps"

"What the fuck is *perhaps*!?"

"The world is full of mistakes."

"Don't speak so irresponsibly!"

Although Ayano was resolutely attacking her, Lapis defended, not showing any gaps.

It became obvious crushing Lapis by herself was close to impossible.

"Kazuma, how long will you stand there like an idiot - "

"That's right"

The answer came from an unexpectedly close place, practically from right behind her.

Coincidentally the hand holding Enraiha was seized and Ayano was restrained from behind.

"Wh- wait you, whose ally are you?"

"Just shut up"

Carrying Ayano in his arms like luggage, Kazuma kicked and sent flying Lapis' crystal sword and took his distance.

Unable to escape from Kazuma's binding, Ayano shouted.

"Kazuma! What the heck are you thinking - "

"Calm down. It's coming"

"Eeh?"

"From below"

"------!!"

Ayano finally realized. From underground - no, from a much deeper and darker place, something was drawing near.

Slowly but steady.

"No way - Why?"

"It means the summoning formula had been set up long ago. It would be automatically invoked if the sacrifice were to be complete. Killing her now would have no effect. "

"Correct answer", laughed Lapis so adorable it was totally inappropriate.

"Before long the summoning of Belial will be achieved. And just like the '**worthlessness**' name suggests he will bring nothingness to the surface.

This is just a rough estimate but I believe the entire Tokyo region will, without a doubt, return to nothing."

"For a side show, that's extremely flashy."

"Master told me to put all my effort in this exactly because it's a side show."

".....I see"

At those very typical words, Kazuma unintentional smiled bitterly.

"This is very serious but do your best. Both master and I hope you will overcome this hardship. - Well then"

Saying everything she wanted, Lapis suddenly disappeared.

Those left behind exchanged puzzled glances.

".....What will we do? "

"If we can escape let's go"

But in the time necessary to Belial's appearance, it's impossible to run from the sphere of impact. Then, there's no choice but to fight.

Kazuma threw the yet unconscious Nanase and Yukari over his shoulders and raised his eyes to the ceiling.

"We're flying"

"------eeh? "

Without waiting for an answer, Kazuma clad himself in wind and soared. Taking Ayano and Ren.

Knocking down the ceiling, higher and higher. He stood still at an attitude of a hundred meters and looked down on the surface.

"This is....."

Underneath, a huge pentagram enclosing the entire park was casting light. That was the magic circle to summon Belial.

"So, do you have some idea? "

"Of course not. "

Kazuma replied heartlessly at Ayano's question, full of hope.

"We can't stop the summons, we cannot escape outside the area. In this situation we can only fight against it head on. "

".....that's pretty much a kamikaze....."

"If you have some other idea say it"

As it was impossible to have something so convenient, Ayano shrugged her shoulders showing a bitter smile.

"....Nii-sama....."

Uneasy, Ren clung to Kazuma's arm. With an almost unconscious move Kazuma gently brushed Ren's head and continued the explanation.

"Don't think about it. Strike down in one attack all the power you have. Are there questions? "

"Detective Tachibana? "

After one moment, Kazuma answered Ayano's question.

"She's outside the park. If we're successful it won't have an impact on her. "

He was reluctant to speak about what would happen if they failed.

"Something else? "

Both shook their heads.

"That's good. Get ready then. "

Together with the signal Kazuma threw the burden on both his shoulders. Removing the existence of those girls, drifting inside a wind barrier, from his mind, he boosted his power.

Kazuma's pupils were dyed blue.

Slightly late, Enraiha's flame gripped by Ayano turned crimson.

The magic circle on the surface shined conspicuously brighter. And then, from inside, something rose reaching for the sky.

From the skies that shape could be easily perceived.

It was an arm.

As if trying to grasp the heavens, the five crooked fingers were pushed up, that huge arm darker than darkness itself.

Unbelievably huge, unbelievably wicked, like the world could be ruined by those fingers, that arm carried that much power.

Facing that huge palm, without hesitation Kazuma swung his arm down. At the same time so did Ayano and Ren.

The blue wind, the crimson flame and the golden one, those three powers changed from three helixes to one, melting together, and pierced the dark arm.

A moment of equilibrium. And then -

Stretched down on the ground without enough power to stand, Ren leaked a feeble smile.

"Amazing, we're still alive"

Lying down the same way, Ayano replied.

"That's right, what a surprise. Humans can really do something like this"

"From that way of speaking one might mistake that anyone could have this kind of lack-of-common-sense behavior. Isn't that something only you, those from the Kannagi Clan, whose power separates you by far from the limits of humans, can brag about? "

"I wish you wouldn't treat us like such monsters - whose this? "

Hearing a voice clearly different from theirs, Ayano sat upright panicking.

She saw Kazuma quickly switched to a standing in one knee posture, glaring at them.

An indigo blue mantle wrapping his body. Already without the clown mask, his imposing honest face was exposed.

His outfit was totally different but there was no way to mistake him -

Including infinite hatred Kazuma squeezed out his words.

"Bernhardt……didn't you escape outside the country? "

"And not to see this kind of spectacle with my own eyes? Don't say such foolish things. "

Bernhard answered matter-of-fact. Obliquely behind him, Lapis clearly laughed.

"I apologize. I lied. "

"……."

Several seconds of silence. And then, as if unable to bear it, Kazuma revealed a bitter smile.

"I said the scenario was cliché - I take that back. You tricked me splendidly. "

"I am much obliged. "

Lapis bowed elegantly.

And then, Bernhardt too showed a nod of satisfaction.

"Humpf, that's good. And yet again I cannot praise you enough. With human bodies, even though it was only a portion of it, you defeated an existence that's called Devil King. I have no way of expressing how terrific Kannagi blood is. "

" - This is bad"

While ignoring Bernhardt's words, Ayano was tormented by he impeding crisis to the point of desperation.

That one blow she pointed to Belial was genuinely all Ayano could master.

She doesn't have enough power to burn a sheet of paper.

Ren too - and probably Kazuma too.

Facing them, Bernhardt and Lapis were not exhausted in the slightest.

This was a very desperate situation.

"This is bad - what can I do? "

"Aaah. Ojousan, there's no need to be this alert. I have no intention of fighting you here. "

"----Eeh? "

Ayano blinked at those unexpected words.

"Certainly, for us Yagami Kazuma is a bitter enemy we cannot allow to live. But, I'm a coward. I don't want to fight but when I'm certain of victory"

"Certain? "

"To say it frankly even in this situation, when you're cornered to this extent, I think you are terrifying. I'm not confident of winning. Especially after seeing such an unreasonable ability. "

Was he serious or was he hiding something - she couldn't read the real intentions behind Bernhardt's words.

But right now she couldn't believe them to be true. She didn't know what the opponent was thinking but Ayano was firmly convinced that she would lose if they fought now.

"That's why I'll escape with the experiment data. Isn't that a result that you too should be pleased with?

The <<Seeds>> were annihilated, Pandemonium collapsed, the mastermind escaped outside the country - the incident was peacefully settled, so they all lived happily ever after, huh? ", Bernhardt shamelessly declared.

"Well anyway, I'm happy that I could say my goodbyes directly. Having entrusted a verbal message to my attendant, it would be terrible if she were to forget expressing her gratitude. "

".....you, no way, did you summoned Belial for that purpose? "

"It was one of the reasons.", declared Bernhardt imposing as expected.

"Well then, it's time to say goodbye. Let's meet again before long - "

"Wait - "

Interrupting Bernhardt's words, although staggering Kazuma stood up. And then, staring at Lapis as if scowling at her, he said.

"Tell me one thing. What was the last thought Tsoi Rin left behind? Did she want to tell me something? "

"-----You don't know? "

"I asking you because I don't know! "

Lapis vaguely moved her gaze, seeking her master's approval. Amused, Bernhardt returned a nod.

Acquiring her master's permission, Lapis smiled sweetly. And then she said.

"I won't tell you "

"-----! You bitch - "

"So, as for a hint I'll tell you what I desire. ", whispered Lapis playing with the words to mock him.

The desire of the girl manufactured from the core of Tsoi Rin's last wish. That is -

"I want to kill you"

"------!!"

This time Lapis said the final goodbye to the frozen Kazuma.

"Well then, farewell"

An impermeable, perfect expression of gratitude. While still in that posture of bowing deeply, Lapis disappeared together with Bernhardt.

In the space those two were until a moment ago, a sound poured in the atmosphere. A small air turbulence was produced there.

".....Kazuma....."

As if trying to support Kazuma standing rock still with a stricken appearance, Ayano embraced Kazuma's arm.

Forcefully, Kazuma hugged Ayano's body closely.

So violent as if trying to snatch it away but as frail like a child clinging to his mother's chest.

".....Kazuma....."

".....let's go home"

As if trying to shake off those complicated thoughts, Kazuma squeezed out his voice.

Those were the words of demise that brought to a finish those turmoil events called the Pandemonium incident after a while.

Epilogue

Standing still on the bank of the pond spreading out in the garden of the Kannagi residence, Kazuma was absentmindedly smoking tobacco. But then, that smoke didn't reach Kazuma's lungs even once.

The smoke rising from the pointed end of the cigarette was vainly melting in the atmosphere, vanishing.

The ash that stretched for two centimeters gently crumbled, lying thick on top of Kazuma's shoes.

At that moment Kazuma finally remembered he was smoking.

But unable to immerse himself in the feeling of intoxication nicotine brought about, he meaninglessly looked at the sky.

"Tsoi Rin ------"

She's not beyond the sky. Not even below the ground.

He wanted to protect her - he couldn't. He couldn't do anything for her, he couldn't even help her just a little, he let her die drowned in desperation.

The girl who gave him so many things, he couldn't pay back any of it.

Even a twelve years old kid managed to save one girl from the depth of despair -

It was the first thing that happened this year. Like father like son, Ren experienced the same thing as Kazuma but even so, the result was totally different.

That's right, it was totally different from that time with Tsoi Rin. At the very least, Ayumi died smiling.

But each time he saw his little brother driven by feelings of remorse, Kazuma wanted to tell him.

"You did well"

"You did a thousand fold better than me"

- No, no matter how you multiply zero is still zero, thought Kazuma inside his heart, curving his lips.

He was raging. That's right, he himself understood. He also understood the reason. Because the parting words of that girl were still ringing in his ears.

Lapis was the symbol of his sin embodied before his eyes.

What will he do when facing that girl again -

No, he knew what he had to do. But, can he really do that?

Suddenly his sleeve was pulled.

Turning a dull gaze towards it, before he knew someone else stood next to him.

It was Ayano.

Having an anxious facial expression that was unbecoming for the usually noisy girl, she was timidly pulling his sleeve.

Laughing at how spaced out he was, not realizing how close she was, once again Kazuma looked forward.

"What?", he asked after a pause of several seconds.

Like the wind blowing in a dry desert, his voice had no courtesy.

"Eeh? L- listen...."

The indication of the girl's disturbance was transmitted by the wind.

After only five seconds of waiting for an answer from Ayano, who was faltering for some reason, Kazuma discarded Ayano's existence from his consciousness.

".....it was definitely a lie"

After dozens of seconds passed, Ayano finally answered.

"If she's really carrying the emotion of that Tsoi Rin person, it can't be killing Kazuma. There - "

With those clumsy words Ayano earnestly tried to cheer up Kazuma.

At times like this, Kazuma will always respond this way.

"What happened? Trying to console me, are you feverish or something?"

He will tease her like that.

"Thank you. I'm happy you're worried about me"

Or making her blush by saying so with a straight face or lightly kissing her to make her angry -

Without choosing any, Kazuma looked at the sky in silence. With monotonous tone he spoke to the discolored blue sky.

"I wonder....."

"Kazuma....."

"After all, I couldn't protect Tsoi Rin. She obviously blamed me. Enough to come back in some way and kill me."

"....."

Ayano couldn't see Kazuma's face turned upwards. But if felt to her that this arrogant man was crying, his feeling hurt.

"But, that couldn't be helped. Because at that time Kazuma was still weak."

".....yeah"

Feebly murmuring, Kazuma gathered wind in vain. A whirlwind danced around them, their hair and clothes fluttering.

"---------Kazuma?"

"This power woke up for the first time at the time I went to save Tsoi Rin and was about to be killed."

"------? Isn't that an orthodox pattern for awakening?"

As for the chance for someone's latent capacities to be released, something like a crisis situation was the most frequent way.

Because of a dead end, because you have no other way, you draw out a power you didn't have before demanding a settlement.

If you're being cornered but still think *I have to do something*, for this reason -

"But when Tsoi Rin was killed nothing happened."

"....."

I don't want to die - that thought manifested that hidden power. It means that when he thought *Don't let her die* nothing happened.

For this reason that was an extreme situation without place for justification, the clear difference between the the importance of priorities.

That was the absolute proof he valued his life more than Tsoi Rin's.

Kazuma was scoffing at his abject, miserable, petty self.

"Geez, it's so unsightly I can't even laugh"

"Kazuma.....!"

With an expression full of urgency, Ayano pulled at Kazuma's sleeve. As if trying to stop him from going somewhere far away.

"No way, do you intend to let Lapis kill you?"

"....."

"You can't do that! You're here right? You chose the present, right? Then - "

"No. It's not like that"

Gently brushing Ayano's confused head, Kazuma said.

"I didn't choose it, I decided it - or rather, I remembered what I decided a while ago."

He won't choose anything. He won't cast away that which wasn't chosen. He'll obtain everything he desires. Because right now he has that much power.

"Tsoi Rin's thoughts, Lapis' desire, I'll accept everything and fight against it. And I'll protect you. This time, without fail."

"....."

Those were the words that expressed his innermost thoughts much more frankly than ever before, but hearing those, on Ayano's face there was no sight of delight.

Rather she frowned, dissatisfied, and glared at the man as if she finally understood -

Without saying anything, she tried kicking him near his waist.

Gan!

A heavy feeling was transmitted through the leg.

Nevertheless, because of Kazuma's tough legs and loins, he took that shock perfectly.

Conversely, as if she kicked a big tree with deep roots, Ayano's stance crumbled and she staggered.

"Tch, wah - "

Ayano fell backward with one leg raised. Behind her is the pond -

But, on the verge of falling, Kazuma pulled Ayano's leg towards him.

Ordinarily, if someone would have tried that on him, he would topple that person in the pond without hesitation but Ayano's legs were not something ordinary.

With one leg on the ground, she barely managed to stand up.

"Le- let go, baka!"

Pressing down with both her hands the skirt that rolled up, Ayano shouted bright red.

"That's a surprising way of talking considering I just saved you, huh?"

"Wasn't there a better method?"

"The leg was the closest"

Answering in a nonchalant face, Kazuma released her leg.

"So?"

"Wh- what?"

"Do you kick people for no good reason?"

Asked about the reason for the sudden assault, Ayano turned her face away pouting.

Continuing to be silent and reaching her limit after dozens of seconds, still facing away she said.

"I, I never said I want you to protect me"

"Me too, I don't remember asking for your opinion."

"It's not like that!"

Facing Kazuma with her whole body, Ayano shouts.

"Am I that unreliable?"

That was an acute question, the meaning of her life hanging on it.

But, while Kazuma blinked, seeming surprised, he did not give her the answer she wanted.

It wasn't acting. This man really didn't understand. Even though she knew that, Ayano's irritation became worse.

"I don't know what happened in your past! But, isn't it difficult? Isn't it painful? Rely on me at least in those times! I can fight too!"

She doesn't complain about Kazuma protecting her. Instead, she's rather happy. Because she understands she's being considered important.

However, only being protected is not good enough.

"What am I to you? Just excess baggage? A burden? Should I hide behind your back so I won't get in your way and after the battle ends embrace and kiss you as a token of appreciation? Don't look down on me!"

The princess protected by the strong knight - Ayano's pride wasn't so low that she would be satisfied in such a position.

Even Kazuma is not almighty. He's not invincible.

At the times he cannot fight the enemy by himself, at last at those times she wanted to be depended on. She wanted to be counted on.

"Don't burden only yourself with everything. I won't tell as much as to entrust your back to me but, but if I can help you just a little - "

Calming herself - just a little - Ayano timidly looked up to Kazuma.

Kazuma was staring at Ayano with a dumbfounded expression.

It was rare one had the chance to see Kazuma in mute amazement but, of course, that's not what Ayano wished for.

"---------enough already!"

Shouting in anger, Ayano turned away. But, as she only turned away without leaving, it was clear it wasn't already enough.

"....."

In silence Kazuma continued looking at Ayano who was standing rock still.

Obstinately turning away but even so she continued staying in the center of his field of vision as if saying *I do care*.

Kazuma's amazed facial expression was gradually turning turning to a wry smile, very much like the usual Kazuma.

He looked at his watch rebelliously trying to time how long her obstinacy would continue.

Several minutes later the same situation still continued.

Ayano did not move her gaze.

The one that moves first loses - she glared right in front with so much drive like she was in a duel.

As for Kazuma, he gave up looking at her directly, gazing at the girl's stiff profile outside the boundary.

Although she was certainly aware of his being, her facial expression could not be read.

Putting himself in such a one-sided advantageous position, he was enjoying himself with Ayano's reaction without getting tired of it.

The silence continued further. But, before long the equilibrium crumbled.

A gust of wind blowing through made ripples on the water surface and made Ayano's hair flutter.

That hair riding upon the wind, fluttering, was touching Kazuma's body.

It looked like that was in replacement for her frozen body, reaching out, requesting Kazuma's heart.

"..........aa....."

Noticing the dangerous, quick intimacy, Ayano slightly stirred.

Should she pretend she didn't notice and take more distance, for the long interval called an instant she hesitated.

In the end Ayano didn't move. Faster than it takes to reach the conclusion, Kazuma moved.

Kazuma gently took in his hand a tuft of hair playing in the wind.

And then he lightly bent over and kissed it with affection.

"……..!"

Sharply catching her breath, Ayano's body trembled.

She can't move - no, moving is scary.

No matter how should she react to Kazuma's act, she felt that it will bring about some definite change.

Her body was hot.

It was as if even the tips of her hair were sensitive.

The feel of those lips touching her hair, that warmth, she could clearly sense it.

"……."

Flushing red until the nape of her neck, Ayano's whole body was tense as if enduring something.

Her chest was painful.

No matter how restlessly she breathed in, not enough oxygen reached her brain and she could not think straight.

Kazuma's lips touching her hair.

All her nerves were concentrated in that one point.

What to think?

How should she act?

She did not understand. She could not think of anything.

While repeating breathing a little faster, stuck in an impasse, Ayano's thoughts continued in an endless loop.

After enjoying that supple feeling to his heart's content, Kazuma let go of Ayano's hair.

Thanks to the always forward-facing girl breathing life into him, that useless strain disappeared.

Thinking about it, Ayano already saved him many times over.

Looking at this from a different perspective, saying *I'll protect you* was close to arrogance.

The girl who released him from being stuck in the past is not a powerless, frail princess.

To put it into words, if the knight who dedicated his entire life to the sword was captured, she would personally charge into the enemy camp -

"What are you doing!? Follow me!"

Easily able to imagine even the scene of giving an order to the dumbfounded knight, Kazuma burst into a faint laugh.

That was so very Ayano-like. Or rather, very suitable for them.

Accepting Ayano's request, instead of congratulations, Kazuma lightly strikes her ass.

"Well, take care of me, partner"

He could swear on it, Kazuma didn't have any evil intentions. He just thought that was just the right spot to do it.

But, regarding the girl that became oversensitive from the unfamiliar situation, that stimulus felt more like a club blow.

"Kyan!?"

Her rigid body was rebooted and right up - no, because of the stimulus from behind, Ayano jumped up somewhat diagonally.

But, just like it was stated before, they were standing on he side of a pond.

Which means -

'Dopan'

For good of for evil, the pond was pretty deep.

"What happened!?"

Hearing the sound of water, Ren rushed out from the room. He courteously closed the futsuma and waited without eavesdropping but as expected he felt some sort of disturbance.

After that, Kirika and Juugo followed.

"Nii, sama---?", asked Ren quizzically, standing still on the porch.

What was in front of his eyes could rarely be seen - or rather, he saw for the first time his brother at a loss.

And then --- only that.

There was nothing else. Not even Ayano's figure who was supposed to have chased after Kazuma.

"Well....."

Remembering he heard the sound of water, Ren shifted his attention to the pond.

The water surface that was supposed to be calm was producing huge ripples.

Pretty big - as if they were produced by dropping a forty five kilo mass, those kind of huge ripples.

Including shock and blame, Ren glared at Kazuma.

"Nii-sama, no way - "

"Aah - is it my fault? this - "

While looking away and scratching his cheek, Kazuma murmured some vague words.

Convinced to the utmost limit by those words, Ren severely rebuked his brother, ten years his senior.

"What are you thinking!? I don't know what Nee-sama told you, but pushing her into the pond because you got angry!"

"No.....I didn't really push her....."

Kazuma offered a frail excuse.

That was an exceedingly bad situation. Angry and with a dreadfully threatening attitude, Ren was there but behind him was Juugo standing still in silence, his Kehai becoming exceedingly dangerous.

But, Kazuma instantly forgot about them.

The reason for that was that a much more terrific threat burst out nearby.

'Dopaaaaan!'

Already producing a several times louder water sound, a huge water column stabbed the sky.

"----------tch!"

Kazuma immediately leaped ten meters, taking the fight posture.

'Zabaan!'

The large quantity of water blown high upwards fell down pulled by gravity and soaked the lawn.

The released mist sprung up.

And then, from the bottom of the pond with a remarkably decreased water volume -

- a raging demoness landed.

"....."

Because of the dripping water coming from her drenched hair and clothes Ayano started walking like a ghost.

Her hanged down face could not be seen.

But her route was accurately, extremely accurately headed for Kazuma who was now about to escape moving backwards.

"A....A--, Ayano? I think you know it but I didn't really push you - anyway, let's talk about this. Peacefully."

Ayano did not reply. Silent, indifferent, she steadily stepped forward.

It was clear there was no room for negotiation.

"Hey, guys, do something"

Looking behind requesting help, Kazuma noticed that those three who were supposed to have been right behind moved away.

"Wait you guys. Why are you out the line of fire?"

"Because we don't want to get involved."

The one replying point-blank was Ren. He continued even more heartless.

"Nii-sama too, don't stand there, move closer to the fence. At this angle the house will be burned."

"You have no sympathy!?"

"There nothing I can do for you!"

Ren replied to Kazuma's shout that was closer to a shriek now in almost the same manner.

"No matter how you think about it, Onii-sama's the one at fault. Give up and let her hit you at least once."

"One hit, huh? I'll die if she hits me once!"

"It will be fine since it's Nii-sama-----perhaps"

Shrugging his shoulders, Ren tried to assure him without any basis.

The last part only was mingled with his true opinion.

"You------"

Trying to retort something to his heartless little brother, Kazuma turned ahead with a cramp on his face.

Ayano stopped walking. The distance between her and Kazuma was approximately five meters.

She was already one step inside the range - what is called the reaching distance.

A violent fighting spirit that could be felt from the other side of the globe burst out.

Instantly, Ayano's body shed a dazzling light and the water sticking to all her body disappeared without a trace.

Not even water vapors appeared, as the hydrogen atoms and the oxygen atoms composing the water molecule instantly changed to plasma.

"Wh- wait. If we talk we'll understand----"

Ayano replied to Kazuma's words by extracting Enraiha. Shuffling on her tiptoes, she shortened the distance.

At the time Kazuma was for the first time really thinking of running, a dignified voice resounded from behind.

"Ayano"

As one would expect, unable to ignore her father's appeal, Ayano suddenly stopped.

In a dignified manner, Juugo told his daughter who, even then, didn't lower her sword.

"I will protect the house. There's no need to hold back, use your whole power"

"Waah, I can't believe this Oyaji - Dowaaah!?"

Deserted even by Juugo, his last ray of hope, Kazuma cursed him in a small voice. But, immediately confronting an impossible situation, those boos were erased by the sound of an explosion.

In one portion of the Kannagi residence a caloric value that could be compared with the temperature at the heart of a sun sprung forth.

1. ↑ Editor's note: I guess that's the word lost in translation Antanaru (talk)